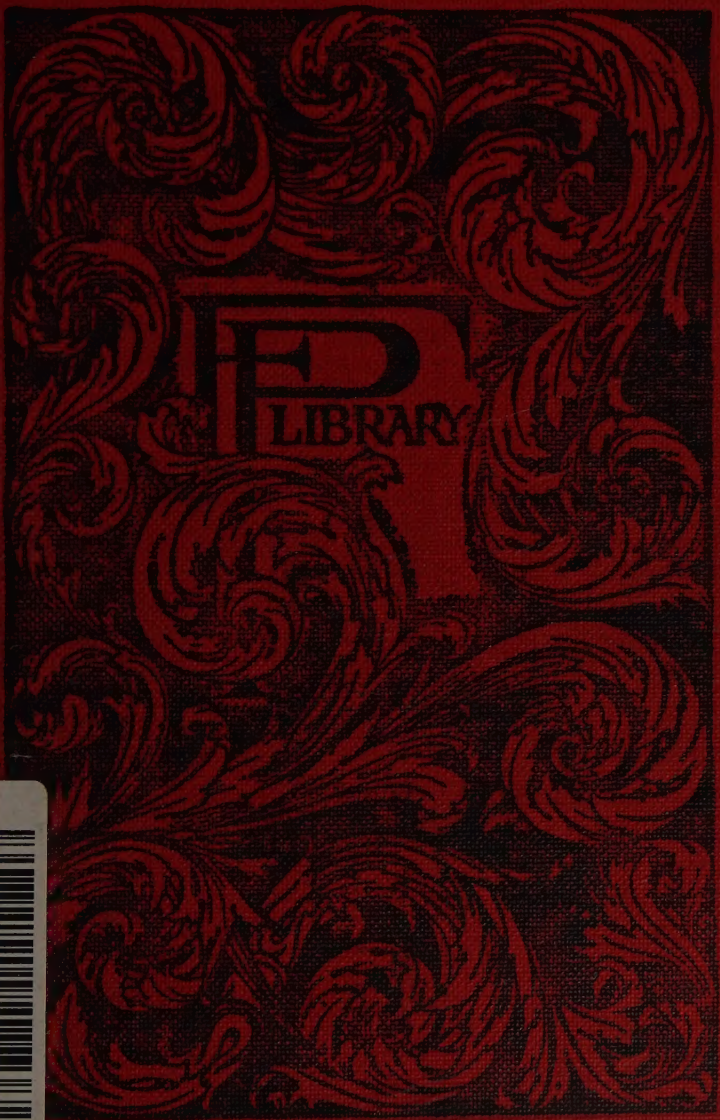

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THE HEN HERDER

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BY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. 11

CHAPTER II. 17

CHAPTER III. 29

CHAPTER IV. 39

CHAPTER V. 52

CHAPTER VI. 64

CHAPTER VII. 70

CHAPTER VIII. 78

CHAPTER IX. 83

CHAPTER X. 92

THE HEN HERDER

CHAPTER I

"He arrives," said Hen' Lyman, veteran foreman of the Ess-Eff, reaching into his hind pocket for his plug of Star chewin', "on the stage this afternoon. The Old Man hires him. I don't see him none until erbout an hour ago when I was reportin' to the old man concernin' the loco steers me an' Slim finds over to the *'royo seco.*

"Him an' the Old Man is talkin' chickens. This Homer Higgins——"

"This which?"

Lyman turned his sun-wrinkled eyes on the speaker, Thayer, buster for the outfit. The riders of the Ess-Eff had come in for the day. They had washed up, and, according to custom, they had assembled on the top rail of the branding corral, looking like so many huge grasshoppers as they awaited the welcome clang of Cookie's gong.

"Homer Higgins is his name,' went on Lyman, tucking his chaw in one leathery, creased cheek. "An' it fits him. He's chewin' an' bunkin' with us. The Old Man gives him one of his good cigars, the kind with the black an' gold band. Me, I've been workin' for the Ess-Eff thirty-four year, an' I never got one of them cigars. I get mine from the cardboard stogie box. Flor de Cabbage. Not that I'm complainin'. I'm givin' you hombres the tip not to ride this same Higgins too hard. He's ace-high with the old man."

"Miss Mary seen him yet?"

"She ain't back from ridin'. As I ses, him an' the Old Man is talkin' chickens. The Old Man gives me a knockdown. 'This is Homer Higgins, Hen',' he ses. 'He's a chicken expert. I'm plumb tired,' ses the Old Man, 'of havin' Sam Peters carryin' off all the prizes to the County Fair. Me, I'm goin' to take the blue ribbons this fall with these barred Plymouth Rocks. They're pure strain,' ses he. 'There ain't nothin' on the Ess-Eff but pure strain an' never will be, but these hens ain't bin earnin' their keep. Higgins is goin' to mend that.'"

"Old Man kiddin'?"

"He didn't act like it. Higgins pipes up. His face is all puffed up with sunburn an' his mouth puckers. He's got on store duds, he wears a funny cocked hat an' yeller shoes. 'They need green feed,' he 'lows. 'Turn 'em loose in the 'falfa,' he ses. 'They'll git the green stuff an' they'll hunt bugs,' ses he. 'Ev'ry time a hen swallers a bug,' ses Higgins, 'she gits her weight in protein.'"

"What's that?"

"You kin search me. 'It means more eggs, more breast meat an' better plumage,' ses Higgins. 'That's what we're after,' pipes the Old Man. I snorts. 'Hell,' I ses, 'I thought this was a cattle ranch.' 'That's yore end of it, Hen',' ses the Old Man, an' I sees I warn't popular. So I vamoses."

"What's he look like?"

"You'll see him, come grubtime, Thayer. He's medium size but stocky. Hefty round the chest an' sorter short legged. Got a nose like a rooster's beak, what you kin see of it for the sunburn. Got a good pair of gray eyes. An' he's strong with the Old Man, you remember that, if his job *is* herdin' hens."

"A hen herder! That's a hell of a job fer a full-grown man."

"He's got his growth, Thayer. He's a plumb

tenderfoot, I reckon, but he ain't no damn fool. His eyes is too good fer that."

Thayer's sobriquet passed along the fence rail with chuckles of appreciation.

"Homer Higgins, the Hen Herder!"

The object of their mirth came into view, smoking the cigar with the black and gold band. He stopped at the trough, washed his hands, and gingerly applied water to an inflamed countenance. His tweeds were old and baggy, his yellow shoes conspicuous. In the city he would pass as a man neither especially impressive nor insignificant. In the surroundings of the ranch he appeared incongruous. The top rail became silent. The Hen Herder did not seem to feel that he was either the recent cause of conversation or the present one of quiet inspection. He finished his ablutions and walked over to the bunkhouse.

Suddenly the fence riders came to attention. One or two tossed away their cigarettes, others took off their sombreros, tilted low over their foreheads against the westering sun, and slicked their hair. Thayer, who was fingering a harmonica, put it away in his pocket and stroked his black mustache with a certain swagger.

Mary Foster had ridden into sight on her black mare, Mono. She dismounted easily, a slender breeched figure, and saluted Stephen Foster, who came down from the ranch-house porch to meet her, with a kiss. For a moment she chatted with the big, burly figure of the ranch-owner, and then started for the barn, the mare, with reins over the saddle horn, following her.

To reach the barn Mary Foster had to pass the perching riders. This was a nightly custom, and she knew well that all the hands admired her, from Hen' Lyman, who had carried her before she was able to walk, straight down the payroll.

She was the prettiest girl in Ensinada County, the

only unmarried one within a radius of twenty miles, and the heiress of the Ess-Eff to boot.

If she was a little conscious of this, her prestige, it was not entirely her fault. A trifle spoiled, a trifle bossy, not inclined to undervalue herself, it would have been strange if she had not been just that, with her only parent alternating giving her everything she wanted with brief but firm periods of severity and discipline.

The payroll was all accounted for on the fence—Mary knew nothing of the Hen Herder—with the exception of Slim Fessenden, who had drawn some pay and gone to town. This Mary knew, for she had met him on the way. With a score or two of suitors, Slim, who held the state record for hog-tieing, won at the last Ensinada State Fair and Rodeo, was at odds-on in the betting, so far. He was the only one given a bid to sit on the ranch-house porch of a night, anyway.

Slim was lithe and lean and decidedly good-looking. Slim could play the guitar and sing *cantinelas* in a husky but musical baritone. Mary Foster was also musical, with her voice and with the baby grand piano that her father had given her, hauling it twenty miles from Ensinada for a birthday present.

It was significant of Slim's makeup that none of the riders kidded him about his guitar or his Mexican love songs. Slim was a ranch-owner in his own right though he leased the property while he served apprenticeship on the Ess-Eff, biggest and most successful of ranches, learning the modern ways of ranching from Stephen Foster. He was none too eager, it seemed, to terminate his scholarship, for reasons that Mary might have answered. Perhaps her lack of an answer, the tact she displayed in avoiding the question that would have meant that answer, had a good deal to do with that.

Mary passed down the line, greeting each one of

them, the men grinning good-naturedly in a fellowship that held equality without familiarity.

"Seen the new hand, Mary?" asked Hen' Lyman. The "Mary" was a special privilege, not to be foregone.

"Why, I didn't know we needed another rider. Dad was talking about a blacksmith, though."

The grins widened. They looked at her delightedly. Lyman chuckled, wiping his mouth with the back of a gnarled hand.

"I don't reckon this feller knows much erbout a hawss. Yore dad hired him to herd the hens. Name of Homer Higgins."

The girl looked puzzled. Her father's anxiety about the ranch chickens evidently surprised her. Her lips twitched in sympathy with the suppressed guffaws of the riders. But owners' dignity had to be maintained.

"I suppose Dad will tell me about him at supper," she said indifferently. "How is your rheumatism, Hen'?"

"Shucks! It ain't nothin' but stiffness of the j'ints. Wears off after I git in the saddle. I ain't applyin' for no pension this year."

Mary nodded, moving on. Thayer had taken out his harmonica again. As the girl reached him he spoke to her.

"Want I sh'ud water yore mare?"

"No, thank you." The girl injected a certain coolness into her voice.

"Jes' as soon."

"I prefer to do it myself, thank you."

"Fessenden go inter town?"

This was stepping across the limit. She looked at him haughtily, but his dark eyes held their bold regard. The "buster's" lips curved into almost a leer before he covered them with his harmonica and started to breathe softly through the reeds. The

girl pretended not to hear him, though her face flushed with anger as she went by with the mare following. Thayer was playing the air of the *cantinela* Slim had sung to her on the ranch-house porch the night before.

The cook's assistant whanged upon the gong. The riders slid from the rail as one, eager for steaks and biscuit, for pie and coffee, hurrying to the eating shanty. Lights appeared in the ranch-house. The sun was down, and it was rapidly growing quite dark, with the night chill already in the air, when the girl emerged from the barn. She saw her father on the porch talking with the white-clad figure of Wong, the house cook. They were looking for her, and she hurried on, hungry herself. In the dusk she passed a stocky man in a shapeless suit and a nondescript hat, which he removed. It was too dark to see his face, but she noticed it seemed swollen. A tenderfoot, she told herself with a touch of scorn. Homer Higgins—what a name—Homer Higgins, the Hen Herder! That nickname would stick to him. She wondered whether the boys would try to haze him.

Her father called to her and she ran lightly up the porch steps and went inside with his arm about her.

Homer Higgins watched her disappear.

"A pretty girl," he told himself. "Probably a spoiled one. But mighty pretty, all ways." He went on toward supper with his lips gathered painfully in a whistle. They were cracked and painful; his whole face was puffed and inclined toward watery blisters, but he did not seem to mind it as he warbled melodiously:

> *"Of all the girls that are so sweet,*
> *There's none so sweet as Sally."*

It seemed that Hen Herder was a man of sentiment and judgment, though his appearance was far from romantic.

CHAPTER II

SILENCE greeted his entrance. There was a vacant place set for him, and he took it with a greeting of "Nice evening, folks." It was answered by grave "Howdys." The Hen Herder knew himself on inspection, under reserved judgment. A dish of sizzling steaks was passed to him, followed by hot biscuits, butter, coffee. He helped himself generously and ate vigorously, though handicapped by his swollen flesh.

"I heered tell," said a cowboy gravely "that folks down to Phenix use cullud umbrellys to keep orf the sun. Seems city folks' skin is mighty tender."

"Like their feet."

"Yes, suh. So I've heerd."

No one looked at Higgins. They seemed by their demeanor to have forgotten his existence.

"Mind passing the salt?" he asked his neighbor pleasantly.

"Sure."

"Salt's good fo' tenderfeet," said the first cowboy. "Ever hear tell of that remedy, Mr. Higgins?"

The Hen Herder looked at his would-be tormentor squarely, with a twinkle in the gray eyes that Lyman had pronounced good.

"They tell me it's good for all kinds of freshness," he said. "I'm taking your word for it."

A man snorted into his coffee cup. The newcomer had scored. Their faces relaxed. Only Thayer's still showed any unfriendliness. It held a sneer that he changed into a smile of apparent liking as he leaned across the table and spoke to the newcomer.

"Reckon you're an expert in yore bis'-ness, ain't you?"

Higgins's voice was mild and drawly.

"I don't know as I hold with experts, but I've been right successful with my business, up to date."

"It's a new one to me. I've heard of a gooseherd, seems to me. Matter of fact, I knew one. He was ha'f witted, an' that was the only useful thing he c'ud do. I reckon there may be duck drivers, turkey trainers, an' rabbit rangers for all I know. They's clowns in the circus has trained ducks an' pigs. Ever do any circus work, mister?"

"No, I ain't. I've kinder figgered I might be able to handle a cur, once in a while." The Hen Herder's voice was still soft, placating, in contrast to Thayer's ill-concealed aggressiveness. "But you can learn a whole lot from chickens," he went on. "I've seen hens that crowed an' thought they were roosters an' I've learned the loudest cockadoodle ain't always the gamest fighter. On the other hand, there's bantams'll put up a mighty good scrap an' give a fowl a touch of game, an' he'll likely surprise you. Yes, sir, he'll likely surprise you. I suppose all chickens, even gamecocks, is chicken hearted, in a manner of speaking, but it'll surprise you what some of 'em 'll tackle an' git away with. They're a heap like people, some ways, are chickens."

It was all said mildly, but there was a direct look and a certain glint in the steady eyes directed upon Thayer that kept the latter from going further with the conversation. Higgins, it seemed, could hold his own, and Thayer was not quite sure of the outcome of a wordy duel. The rest of the table was singularly quiet. Thayer felt the general aloofness. They might be willing to kid the stranger, but they were none of them chummy with Thayer. He knew his work and they respected his prowess in breaking colts, but it was quite apparent to him that they considered

Higgins had scored again. If it had been one of their own crowd they would have joshed Thayer about it, but he was in their circle, and not of it, a fact to which he was sensitive.

Thayer, whose business was breaking horses, weighed about a hundred and fifty-five pounds and his height was five feet eight. He was compact, and wiry, light on his feet, active as a cat. His legs were bowed, his arms a little longer than the average. His forearms on their upper sides were almost completely covered with black hair, extending to his knuckles. He had a shock of coarse black hair, and his eyes were like jet and close together.

In his speciality he was an expert. Bronco busting can never be correctly described as a gentle art, but the average rider respects the spirit of a good horse. Thayer's methods were relentless and cruel. He seemed to enjoy the fierce fight of frantic beast against man from the moment the blindfold was pulled from the shuddering brute until it stood staggering, exhausted, shaken with great sobs of tortured lungs and humbled pride, neck drooping and dejected mien, its sides lathered with sweat and streaked with blood where Thayer had raked it from withers to flanks with his Mexican spurs in unnecessary fashion. Then the buster, one leg crooked about his saddle horn, would roll a cigarette and look for applause. The Ess-Eff outfit, if they were about, did not watch his performance; the applause came only from his half-breed helper, Pedro.

Though a late comer, compared to the rest of them, Thayer had been long enough with the outfit to be accepted. And he was still an outsider.

The others would joyously curse each other in tones, if not terms, of affection. They would smite each other mightily with amiable wallops and indulge in horseplay, but nobody played any practical jokes on Thayer. They listened, when he spoke, with a

grave politeness foreign to their usual happy-go-lucky demeanor; they played cards with him, but no one invited him directly to take a hand, and few drew him into conversation.

Now Lyman got up, his meal finished, and passed back of Higgins, smiting him on the shoulder.

"Son," he said, "you're all right. It ain't yore fault you've bin brung up in a city. We'll teach you to fork a hawss an' make a he-man out of ye afore you're through. You've got the makin's. Ever play poker?"

"Some."

"Then come erlong over to the bunkhouse. We usually have a game this end of the month. Later we ain't so flush. Or else Slim's got our change. He's the best poker hand we've got on the ranch."

They trooped out and assembled in the bunkhouse beneath the electric light. Stephen Foster had a lighting system on his ranch. He had power for his pumps, his wood cutting, even for ensilage. Ranching was not a hit-and-miss occupation on the Ess-Eff. The Old Man knew every cent of his overhead; his beef brought fancy prices for solid, fat-streaked, prime flesh. His water system was extensive and included baths in the ranch-house, hot and cold showers for his men. The chow was the best in the state, if not in several, and he claimed that it all paid him. There was a waiting list for help on the Ess-Eff. Thayer had filled a vacancy on account of his speciality. So long as a man held down his job it was his.

Thayer swaggered a little, bragged a good deal, until it became patent that no one listened to him whether he believed him or not. It was known that Lyman would willingly have sought an excuse to get rid of him, but Lyman was fair, and he could find no conscientious criticism of Thayer's work. He had no accidents.

"He rides like a burr on a broomtail's mane," Lyman summed up to the Old Man at the end of Thayer's first month. "The boys don't cotton to him. He plays the mouth harp like a syrene, but he ain't no conducer to gen'ral harmony. He's a bad loser an' a bully winner at poker."

"Don't cheat?"

"He's still got his health, ain't he?" retorted Lyman. "No, he's a slick gazabo."

"We need him for the present," Foster answered. "Slim c'ud do the breakin', but I feel sorter responsible about him. An' then——"

"Miss Mary w'udn't admire to see him bunged up."

Foster looked sharply at Lyman, but the foreman was employed in biting off a chaw and his face was as expressionless as a wooden image.

"Huh!" grunted Foster, and changed the subject.

Thayer joined the game by seating himself first and shuffling the cards. Lyman handled the chips.

"Fifty-cent limit is our game," the foreman told Higgins. "Straight Western poker. Jackpots when three of a kind or better win."

"Suits me," the Hen Herder said amiably.

It seemed to. He played a liberal game. Once in a while they caught him in a bluff, oftener they thought they would, and found he had the cards. He seemed to draw to straights and flushes from his exhibited discards, but he never won on one. And he won with steady frequency. His puffed face was a perfect mask, and he had an excellent conception of the values of the cards and an almost uncanny prevision of how the rest drew.

At midnight Lyman called the game.

"I reckon you git up at cockcrow, Higgins," he said. "Rest of us'ud better roost, for we're all early birds. But we don't git up early enough for you when it comes to poker. You may be a tenderfoot,

but we're sure soft handed an tender hearted in handlin' cards. I'd like to see you take a whirl at Slim. Reckon we'd better redooce the limit if you want us to set in or there won't be more'n one game a month. It's lucky I bought a box of chewin' payday."

He scratched his thinning thatch ruefully. Thayer sat with a scowl. The play had been intent for the past three hours and the Hen Herder had practically all the chips in front of him besides having sold back several stacks to the less fortunate.

"Stack up an' cash in," said Lyman, "an' we'll roll in. Thayer, you bought five stacks, what you got?"

Thayer pushed over a few whites and a lonely red chip with a muttered oath.

"The Lord loves a cheerful loser," said Lyman. "Next?"

Payment was just concluded and the yawning cowboys were preparing to shed their clothes before turning into the tiers of bunks when there came a scuffle of hoofs in the soft dirt outside and the door of the bunkhouse was flung open. For a moment a tall figure stood theatrically revealed against the dark blue night where the stars were burning fiercely, then Slim Fessenden strode into the room.

Slim was almost a picture cowboy. His outfit set off his tall figure, well carried, built and trained for efficiency. There was little to him that could be spared by way of improvement and his face was manly and strong of feature. His eyes shone in the light of the lamp and his whole manner suggested excitement It emanated from him like a magnetic current, and the riders crowded round him. He delivered the core of his news dramatically.

"Ober's out! Broke out of the penitentiary yesterday with his pals. The whole gang is clear, an' they claim they's headin' this way."

A babble of exclamations and questions broke out.

All idea of sleep had vanished from the Ess-Eff bunk-house. Lyman's insistent voice brought some kind of order at last.

"Git back an' shet up, you pack of howlin' coyotes. You, Slim, tell us all you know an' how you come to know it. Sit on the table. This is Homer Higgins, new hand. He's an expert on poultry an' poker. He's the only one of us, I reckon, that don't know erbout Ober. We'll tell him later. You shoot. Headin' this way, are they? Go on; go on an' shoot."

Lyman was palpably fired with enthusiasm over the fact that the Ober outfit was likely to arrive at the Ess-Eff. So were the rest of them. But age slid off Lyman, he appeared recharged, rejuvenated. He seemed to the interested Higgins to actually quiver with eagerness like an old hound set upon the scent of an ancient and resourceful quarry.

"I was at Lew's place, sittin' in on a game at draw when some *hombre* trails in an' says there's a notice posted in the window of the Sormiento *Herald*. I cash in an' we all take a look at it. It didn't say much. Just that Ober an' five others had broke out. Thought to have made north on hawsses furnished by confederates. Railroads being watched. Warden says big reward will be offered.

"Sheriff slaps me on the shoulder as I turns away. Said he'd been lookin' for me. C'udn't raise the ranch on the phone an' wanted I sh'ud tell the Old Man he'd be out early in the mornin'. I figured I'd better burn the wind back to the ranch. So I did. I woke up the Old Man an' told him. He said—" for a moment Slim appeared to hesitate—"he said for me to tell you he wanted to talk to the outfit 'fore you start work termorrer. Said for you to go over to the ranch-house first thing in the mornin', Hen'."

"If they come this way we'll be waitin' for them," said a rider, slapping his thigh and talking as if in anticipation of a treat.

"Sure will," echoed another. "If they come. If they've got the nerve."

"Ober's got it, anyway. 'Member what he said to the Old Man. I heard him. 'I'll git you,' ses Ober, 'I'll git you an' even up with you, Foster, if I have to wade hip deep through hell in bilin' sulphur.'"

"If he comes he'll figger he's bin doing jest erbout that, time the Old Man gits through with him."

"They'll know we'll be watchin'."

"Huh! We can't watch all creation. There's two or three ways they might come in. They'll come a sneakin' afteh dark. Run a herd over a cliff an' fire the ranch buildin's."

"Not if we see 'em first."

"Got to do better shootin' than we did last time. Slim made the only hit, an' that was on a hawss."

"We rounded 'em up, jess the same."

"Wonder what the Old Man'll have to say. War talk?"

"Sure thing. Ask Hen'."

"The Old Man can tell you that better'n me," said Lyman, appealed to. "Higgins, yore eyes is bustin' out of yore head like a frawg's. You don't know erbout this Ober, bein' a newcome. I'll enlighten you while the boys decide jest what they're goin' to do individual an' collective agin this bunch of yeller-bellied convicts."

Higgins nodded his eagerness.

"This Ober and his gang holds up the Sormiento National Bank in broad daylight. That was this same Ober business. It comes out at the trial; he has a record an' he'd bin roamin' round the country pickin' out soft places.

"It happens three years ago w'en Miss Mary is away to business college larnin' how to keep accounts for her dad. It's right on the fall round-up an' we're mighty busy on the Ess-Eff, an' every other ranch.

"Ober an' his gang, six of 'em all told, rides up in broad aftehnoon. One holds the hawsses in the alley between Lew's place—where Slim was playin' ternight—an' Quong Sing's Laundry. The saloon an' the laundry is both blind on the alley side.

"Ober an' his buckos walk in the bank with blue pokerdot bandanners over their ugly mugs. No one in there doing bisness. It was about ha'f-past two. They stick up Howard, the cashier, an' young Seeley, who's his assistant. Howard reaches for his gun, which is a foolish move for an amachure, an' they shoot him. Ober's gun gits him. They knock young Seeley senseless, which warn't much of a job, to my mind, loot the safe, clean out Howard's cage of loose bills, an' starts for their hawsses.

"Sam Bligh was comin' outer the saloon an' he sees 'em pilin' out of the bank with the blue bandanner masks. Sam's full as a tick an' he ain't sure is they three or six of the galoots, but he sabes something is wrong even before one of them fires a shot at him to sort of warn him back, I reckon. That riles Sam an' he draws, flingin' lead with his six-gun an' dodgin' the bullets they send his way with a drunken man's luck.

"Folks run out an' the alarm starts. Firin' is gen'ral an' promiscus. Ober an' his gang is dodgin' inter the alley when someone hits one of 'em jest under the collarbone as he turns for a last shot. Two of 'em catches him an' gits him on his hawss an' away they go bent for hell an' highwater with everyone millin' like mad an' yellin' fo' hawsses. Time they git started, the gang is a mile ahead.

"Perley—that's the sheriff; you'll see him termorrer—is in his office. He's gettin' erlong, is Perley, though he won't admit to it, fo' all he's old enough to be my father an' I'm no infant. Folks claim he was snoozin', it bein' a hot day—a bilin' hot day, as a matter of fact. Nigh cost Perley his job. But he

gits his posse tergether pronto an' he phones all round. Phones out here.

"Some part of the thirty thousan' Ober gathers belongs to the Old Man. He gits sore right away, rounds up some of us boys an' off we go atootin' to cut their trail.

"The Old Man figgers out that Ober is a cool hand an' he figgers that he'd likely planned his gitaway beforehand. Also he thinks that there is liable to be a local man or two in the deal, seein' someone must have looked the bank over an' picked out the alley. So the Old Man chooses the Bad Lands district as a likely place. Cut through there an' you're in the Pearson's Hole country, where the world is sure turned upside down an' there's no better place for hideouts, with ha'f a dozen exits to choose from.

"Well, it seems Perley follers trail till they lose it on the malpais. Then he figgers they'd turned off short an' made for Espuma Crick an' Mesa Plano. Meantime, the Old Man an' six more of us streaks it cross sage an' sand beelinin' fo' the Bad Lands, belly to ground on the first string hawsses.

"The Old Man guesses right. An' he sure set the pace for us. 'I got sixteen hundred dollars in that Ober's cleanup,' he ses. "'Tended it to pay roundup salaries. If you boys need yore money you got to ride fo' it.'

"We ride. We sure ride, Higgins. The movie pitchers had nothin' on us. When we cuts trail we ain't ha'f a mile behind 'em an' we had all the speed of 'em. There was some shootin' an' damn bad shootin' at that. A tearin' ride like that upsets a man's aim consid'rable. Slim, he hits a hawss an' that sort of discourages 'em. 'Sides, we was ridin' round 'em. They elevate their hands.

"There was on'y four of 'em. One of 'em had trailed off with the feller who was wounded. The Old Man figgers these two was the local men makin'

for some hideout, prob'ly with the Mexicans over to Carocas. The four we git was all strangers. Ober, he cuts loose an' spiles the atmosphere like to pizen it.

"And there warn't a cent along the lot of 'em! We look like a lot of ha'f-baked fools. We was all for stringin' of 'em up, what with Fowler bein' shot down, the stealin' of the money, an' the languidge Ober uses. Slim offers his rope first, an' the rest of us follers suit. But the Old Man rules us out. We don't know Fowler's dead, he ses. It's his money, he ses. An' it was him Ober was cussin' at in partickler.

"That was logic, an', after we find we can't persuade 'em to tell us erbout the money, we take 'em back to town. The Old Man collects the reward an' divvies it with us. Ober gits ten years with his pals, Fowler gittin' well. They should have given 'em life. That's erbout all they is to it."

"Never found the money?" asked Higgins.

"Never did, though they's bin a heap of huntin' fo' it. You see, when Perley is follerin' trail he finds tracks for six. We round up four. The two of 'em was wise enough to cut loose on the malpais where the rock don't hold trail at all. Looks like they got the money an' cached it. Some figger it must have bin hid in Owl Canyon. That's full of caves an' the caves is full of rattlers. Hank Lemon got bit probin' after the *dinero* an' nigh died afore he c'ud reach whisky. If the gang's loose agin, Owl Canyon'll be a good place to watch, I'm thinkin'.

"But the main p'int is they 'pear to be headed to even up with the Old Man as well as git the money. We're likely to see some fun. You better go heeled, Higgins. Ever tote a gun?"

"Better not if you don't know how to shoot it."

"I'll give you the loan of one."

The Hen Herder, smiling, refused the offer.

"Take them some time to get here, riding from the penitentiary, won't it?" he asked.

"All of a week. They may circle. May lay low a bit here an' there. If the two that got away is still round here they may be in touch with 'em. Call it a week. They'll be a reward an' a heap of people lookin' fo' a chance to collect it. They'll lay up days an' travel nights, likely."

He yawned mightily. The tale was an old one to the others, and they turned again toward the bunks. Slim Fessenden spoke aside with Lyman.

"It's funny, Hen', but when I tell the Old Man he says he knew all erbout it already. An' he says for me to keep *mudo* about that. Knew it yesterday afternoon, ahead of the paper. Paper didn't have it in the reg'lar edition that gits out at four o'clock. Didn't git it in time to issue an extra. Didn't stick the bulletin up till nigh on eleven o'clock."

"Don't let that break yore sleep, Slim," said Lyman. "The Old Man don't lie, an' he sure knows what he's erbout. You keep mudo."

"There'll be a nice reward," said Thayer. "I didn't git a cut on the last, seein' I warn't with the outfit. Mebbe I can git a slice of this, unless Higgins here herds the gang solo."

There were no smiles at the gibe. Even if any one else but Thayer had made it they were all too sleepy. Higgins paid no attention. In five minutes the bunk-house was filled with deep breathing punctuated by snores.

CHAPTER III

BREAKFAST, the big preliminary meal of a working day, was nearly over when the Old Man appeared, and, sitting down by Lyman, asked for a cup of courtesy coffee. Stephen Foster was the type of man who seems to have been continually growing and hardening since his youth, like a lusty tree. He could no longer match his own litheness against that of a young horse; he would have almost broken the back of the young horse if he had ridden it, but his six feet of bone and muscle and solid flesh made up a picture of prime manhood. His face, stern-moulded, gray of eye, yet relieved with hints of humor, could have posed as a model for a type of efficiency of purpose and will backed by reason.

As he set down his empty cup, the table silenced, waiting for the Old Man to begin.

"Well, boys, Ober's out," he said briefly. "Reckon Slim told you all about that. You all know—all except Thayer an' Higgins—what Ober 'lowed he'd do to the Ess-Eff outfit. An' I don't believe he was braggin'. He's headin' this way for his money, an', if he sees a chance to kill two birds with one stone, he'll sneak up on me an' wring my neck—if I let him.

"Ober ain't exactly a brave man nor a coward. First an' foremost, he's a crook. He'll do all the deviltry he can 'thout standin' in the open to do it. I don't know what line it'll take. He may try to hamstring the steers, drive 'em off, herd 'em over a cliff. He may try to set fire to the ranch if the wind's

right. I'm bettin' that whatever he does he'll do after dark, an' that he won't come close to the ranch-house 'thout it's darker'n usual.

"Two things we got to do. Stop him from mussin' up the Ess-Eff an' put him back in the pen where he belongs; unless he happens to git mussed up too bad himself in the scuffle.

"I want you boys should go heeled from now on. They can't git here inside of five-six days. They've got to fool the posses after 'em. They've got to keep out of sight of folks. But we'll start right off bein' prepared. Mebbe we can figger out some sort of a trap for them to ride into. Meantime we'll ride herd on all the bunches an' bring the three-year-olds to closer range. Later we'll divide watches an' patrol the ranch buildin's nights.

"I've said nothing to my daughter, so far. I may send her away. An', if any of you boys go inter town there's no sense in tellin' what we're doing' on the Ess-Eff. Ober may not be comin' here at all. If he does an' we all interview him, time enough to talk about it. I reckon you all sabe. Through breakfast, Higgins?"

The Old Man and the Hen Herder left the shack together. Foster headed toward the ranch-house, where Higgins saw a girl talking to a man who had evidently just arrived in a car that had been halted in front of the steps of the long porch.

"That's Perley," said Foster. "Want to hear what he's got to say?"

The eyes of Mary Foster widened as she beheld the new hand strolling up to the porch with her father; widened yet more as she saw her parent hand out two cigars with the black and gold bands, one to Perley and one to Higgins, while he lit a third for himself.

Mary Foster considered the ranch-house her own domain. She had invited the sheriff up on the porch when he had inquired for her father, as he was an old

friend. She had permitted Slim the veranda privilege upon certain occasions—not too frequently lest the young man might attempt to presume as a favourite. Lyman sometimes came there, but it was thoroughly understood that she was the skipper of that quarter-deck. For business purposes her father had his own little office shack where the riders of the Ess-Eff were given instructions, paid off, and sometimes harangued in no gentle terms by the Old Man when things went awry.

And now Stephen Foster had brought up a hired man whose job was not at all what Mary Foster considered a job for a real man. Chickens were fussy, foolish things, and Mary had never bothered with them farther than to voucher accounts for their feed.

That her father had a perfect right to bring any one up on the porch of his own ranch-house Mary did not deny, yet she looked at the stocky figure of Homer Higgins in his slop-tweeds with a disfavor that Higgins was fully conscious of. But, to Mary's secret surprise, he did not show any signs of awkwardness, but stood by the railing, calmly smoking the cigar of favor, flipping its ash away from time to time.

Sheriff Perley looked at the Hen Herder keenly, Mary noticed, but he shook hands with him as Foster introduced them.

"Sheriff, here's Mr. Higgins, chicken expert. He's goin' to collect all the prizes an' break all the records in this country for layin' an' fleshin' an' featherin', with the Ess-Eff hens."

"This is my daughter, Mary," Foster concluded.

Mary started a frosty little bow and checked it. The Hen Herder's eyes were meeting hers squarely, and there was something in them that told her feminine instincts that the man was not quite as she had hitherto rated him. There was something else in them that suggested a slightly humorous appreciation of the

situation and the sentiments she held for him. She closed her lips firmly to show that she held no intention of greeting him by word of mouth. Then she turned to her father.

"Is there anything he wants?" she asked. It was a nasty little flick, and Mary was the more ashamed of it as she now saw a distinct twinkle in the glance of Higgins.

"He wants to talk gluten an' meat-scraps, whitewash and green feed with me, Mary, just as soon as Perley an' I git through. Meantime, he might appreciate a chair."

"There are nine of them on the porch," said the girl. "I've got to get busy, Mr. Perley. You'll excuse me? I hope you'll bring Mrs. Perley out on a visit very soon."

The sheriff's narrow face with its high cheekbones, long-lidded eyes either side of a high-bridged nose topping a gray mustache still streaked with yellow, beamed at her.

"Sure will admire to do that. Why don't you come in an' pay us a visit? Mother's gittin' a bit on to ride out here, an' she hates a car. Ses a hawss is good enough fo' her to ride on or behind. I'm feelin' the same way, but a hawss ain't got the speed an' I ain't as limber as I was. Wish you'd come on in an' pay us a visit, Miss Mary. Why don't you come back with me right now an' stay fo' a week? Mother's feelin' a bit downsome an' you'd beat all the doctors to once."

The girl hesitated. She was fond of Mrs. Perley, and the sheriff's plea was well couched. But she fancied she saw some sort of a signal pass between her father and the sheriff, a semaphored twitch of eyebrows. As a woman, Mary was good at reading signs of that kind.

Moreover, Slim's sudden arrival the night before had awakened her. She slept with her windows

wide open to the night. Her father's bedroom was on the ground floor. There had been a cautious tapping, the sound of a window opening wider, of low voices, and Mary, more interested perhaps in the comings and goings of Slim than she acknowledged to herself, slid out of bed, threw on a wrap against the chilly Arizona night, and listened at the sash. She had not heard much, but enough to pique her curiosity.

Now the sheriff had come out. There was something afoot. Foster himself made one slip. Generally he would have protested that he could not spare Mary, and it was a fact that there was plenty of work—more than the ordinary amount—for her to do. But he said nothing. Whereupon Mary inferred that there was an object in getting her to leave the ranch. Therefore she determined to stay. She smelled a mystery.

"I'd love to, but there's too much to do on the ranch right now. I've been away on a shopping trip, Mr. Perley. I'm behind with filing and accounts, and I've got a lot of sewing to do. But give her my best love and say I'll be over just as soon as I can. Good-by."

She tugged at her father's hair affectionately as she passed him and went in. The door closed behind her. Foster rolled his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Slim told you all the news?" Perley inquired.

"Reckon so."

"Humph!" Perley's eyes, like those of Lyman, showed in a triangular setting of lids that drooped as if they were tired, though there was fire in the sun-faded orbs of both of them. Now his glance roved suspiciously toward Higgins. Foster intercepted and answered it.

"You can go right ahead before Higgins. Higgins don't look much like a ranchman, but he's got almighty good recommendations, an' him an' me have got right confidential over chickens an' other things.

Higgins'll like to hear all he can about Ober, bein' a stranger. You shoot, Perley. I suppose you've got some plans you want to talk over."

"I ain't plannin' so much as prayin' that Ober'll come this way. I'm bankin' that he will, to git the money an' mebbe git even with you. I reckon you all'll attend to that end of it, but I sure hope I'll be the one to git the skunk this trip. I nigh lost my job 'count of him, an' if he should 'pear in these parts an' me not round him up, I might as well resign.

"The old lady's sot I've got to resign anyway. Got some idee lately I'm due for a wheel-chair. Worryin' erbout it. I sort of promised her I would resign come this fall, but I'd hate to do it under fire.

"I understand from the bank the Protective Association's got an idee Ober'll head up this way. Fowler said they aimed to send some crackerjack detective up here to help us apprehend him. I reckon they figger we ain't got much brains this way. But their city Hawkshaws never got any nigher to the money 'n we did. I told Fowler the 'sociation better keep their detectives to home, they might git hurt. This ain't no country fo' a tenderfoot. I ain't sayin' anything agin them, mind ye. They're game enough. They might nab Ober an' his gang in a city, but, out here, it's goin' to be hawssback fightin'. Saddle shootin'. Rough country an' hard ridin'. How erbout that, Mr. Higgins? You bein' from the city, I take it."

"The only police I ever saw on horseback were traffic officers," said Higgins. "I imagine most of 'em would be handicapped a bit."

"Sure would. They got a sign up to the bank. *Bankers' Protective Association.* Mebbe they figger it 'ud scare off holdups. 'Bout as much use as a *No Trespass* sign to a kid that aims to go fishin'. Didn't scare Ober none. If Foster here hadn't overhauled him the city bulls 'ud never have caught him. But

it give the 'sociation a black eye, I reckon, that they couldn't turn up that money.

"I'm still strong for Owl Canyon. It's a nacheral hidin' place. So I'm goin' to lay out there an' keep herd on it. If they come yore way first, Foster, I want you should send over fo' me. I don't want to be left holdin' the bag this trip."

"I'll do that. Ober'll likely be careful about Owl Canyon."

"Me, too. We'll be hid out all right."

"Ever figger that the two men who got away might have taken the cash with 'em?"

"Uh-huh!"

"An' spent it? Figgerin' Ober an' his gang was tucked away safe an' double-crossin' him."

"He'd come back if they did. That is if they're local men as we got a hunch they are. He'd come back to square up with 'em one way or another, same way he aims to git square with you. Ober's a real bad man, Foster. He's got a record that'll hang him three times over."

Foster smiled, but he was not making fun of Perley. The sheriff could afford to talk seriously of bad men. There were official notches on the official gun. If he said Ober was bad it meant that the man was lacking in moral sensitiveness, that he would kill without provocation; not in cold blood, according to the popular phrase, but with malicious enjoyment in cruelty and destruction.

"If he starts trouble on the Ess-Eff, Perley," he answered, "it's likely he'll be hung once an' find it sufficient, unless the boys have to shoot him. They were keen for it last time. But I'll send for you, Perley, if we locate him, so's you can be in at the death. You'll do the same with me."

"All right," said Perley, still grumblingly. "But I aim to take him alive, Steve. I'd like to deliver him over intact. I'm admittin' yore grudge if he inter-

feres with yore property, but I sure hope he makes Owl Canyon first."

Higgins listened interestedly, enjoying his cigar. He had seen the lower sash of a window softly creep up and its curtain move once, ever so gently. He read the signs as an indication that Mary Foster had established a listening post, but he said nothing about it, even when the conversation shifted to herself as a topic.

"Goin' to keep Miss Mary on the ranch, Steve?" asked Perley. "She didn't seem to cotton to my bid, but Ober w'ud sure like to even himself with you, through her."

"I reckon I can protect Mary," Foster answered slowly. "She ain't exactly helpless herself. Her grandmother fit Indians when the old folks crossed the prairies, an' her mother had the same spirit. I ain't made up my mind for certain. Time enough in a day or so."

"Wal, I got to be goin'," announced Perley. He nodded casually to Higgins. As he clambered into his car, Foster beside him, Slim Fessenden came cantering up on his buckskin, horse and man in perfect co-ordination. Higgins's eyes held admiration, a certain envy, as they took in every detail of equipment, from the crown of Fessenden's stetson, dandily pinched into a rosette, down to the greased and well-cared-for hoofs of the buckskin. He noted that Slim was wearing a gun on either hip. So did Perley.

"Two-gun man, eh?" he asked. "Don't you dare come inter town all armored up thataway, Slim. I'd have to pre-empt 'em, mebbe. Look too much like you was expectin' trouble."

"Sort of expectin' an' kinder hopin', sheriff. Boss appointed some of us a reception committee."

"Huh! Understand you held a few good hands las' night, Slim. Boys was tellin' me erbout it."

"Reckon I quit at the right time."

"Higgins was doin' the same thing, they tell me," quizzed Foster. "Lyman 'low you two sharks ought to git together."

The two looked at each other, smilingly but appraisingly. They were a decided contrast, Slim with his workmanlike outfit astride his spirited mount and the Hen Herder stockily afoot in his ill-fitting tweeds, with his puffed face red as a tomato. So the girl thought, peering through her curtain.

"Slim," said Foster, as Perley racked his gears into high and sped down toward the ranch gate, "wish you'd take Higgins here over to the corral an' git Thayer to fix him up with a hawss. You better choose the hawss, Slim. Thayer's idee of a tame bronco might not suit Higgins'. He aims to ride easy an' he ain't posin' as a jockey. I'll meet you later, this side of noon, over to the Northeast Pasture. I want to look over those Herefo'd ha'f-breeds."

The Old Man went back up the steps, across the porch and into the house. Higgins half smiled as he thought of Mary Foster lying in wait for her 'ad. The girl was really vitally concerned in the matter, for if Ober knew there was a daughter of his enemy on the ranch he might well plan and run risks to revenge himself through her.

He walked on beside Slim, the cowboy wondering why this tenderfoot chicken-man wanted to ride and what horse might be sufficiently gentled to pack him. All tenderfeet wanted to ride, he told himself, deciding on a white veteran renowned for sense and sure-footedness.

Inside the house Mary Foster pounced on her father.

"Why did you want me to leave the ranch and stay with Mrs. Perley?" she demanded. "I don't think you're a bit nice these days. I heard Slim talking with you last night. He's wearing two guns to-day. So is Hen'. Wong says all the boys are going double-heeled. What did Perley want? And

why did you bring that awful looking tramp of a chickenman up on my porch ? "

" Yore mother had a heap of sense, Mary," said Foster quietly. " One thing I admired especially erbout her. Like all wimmin, she liked to ask questions, but she never asked but one to a time. I don't know that I do want you to leave the ranch. I ain't made up my mind erbout that. But I want you should cut out yore rides for a bit, say a couple of weeks. There's a bunch of outlaws loose somewheres between here an' the penitentiary an' Perley wants us to be on the lookout for 'em. That's all, honey. An' I'm busy as a one-legged knife-grinder."

CHAPTER IV

MARY pouted a little. But she knew the looks of her father's face and when to coax. Besides, there were other sources. She had gleaned mention of the *Herald* and heard the name of Ober. It brought up a vague recollection of something read or heard. Moreover, she was the true daughter of her father and her maternal forebears. She thrilled—and not with fear—at the idea of escaped convicts who might clash with the Ess-Eff riders. She resented a trifle the suggestion amounting to a command that she should give up her rides, and she determined to ferret out just the reason. There was the telephone. She might wheedle the editor or a reporter. She knew the staff. Or there was Slim. She might invite Slim over that night and—well, Slim was human.

She let her father go without remonstrance and interviewed Wong on the subject of supplies.

"Ever do much ridin'?"

Higgins's face was beginning to scale, gray scraps of skin in places, his nose was fire red, his ears the hue of redhot horseshoes, and his lower lip enlarged its split as he grinned at Slim.

"Not on a horse. But I'd like to ride round some while I'm here."

"I'll tell Thayer to give you Blanco. He's old, but he's game. He can pack yore weight all day an' he'll find feed where another hawss 'ud die. You git Thayer to fix the stirrups so they'll be comfortable an' not too short, an' be sure the cinch is tight. After you've gone a ways you'll have to tighten it again, so

you watch Thayer. Blanco's like all cow hawsses; he hates to be tight cinched an' he'll blow himself out like a toad. Outside of that you can leave things to him. He'll take you where you want he should go, an' if you happen to lose yore way, he'll bring you home. I'd stay an' see you set, but I've got to go round up a beef herd for inspection."

"I'm obliged to you," said Higgins. "I'll make out. I've read you don't guide a cow-horse like you do a drivin' horse. Just lay the reins on his neck. That so?"

"Yep. Left side for him to turn right, an' opposite."

Thayer was in the corral with his Mexican helper, working over a harness rigging contrived to break a horse for cart and team. As Slim and Higgins entered the enclosure two or three men, who were classed as hands rather than riders and whose work was round the sheds and corrals, drifted after them curiously, scenting amusement.

"Old Man's orders to give Higgins a hawss," said Slim to Thayer. A glint came into the buster's eyes. He winked one of them at the hands. They interpreted the wink, remembering the wordy encounter of the night before. Thayer meant to get even. Higgins was a tenderfoot. He would get the worst of it this trip, and it should be fun worth watching. They were not malicious about it. A green rider was legitimate sport.

"All right," said Thayer. "Pedro, rope the pinto."

"He's to have Blanco." The faces of the onlookers lengthened. There was no more fun in Blanco than in a rocking horse. Blanco was sedate. There was spirit in the old horse, and fire, but the fire was well smothered.

"Who ses so? Blanco's got a splint."

"Old Man told me to pick the hawss," said Slim easily. He was not so fond of Thayer, either. "Let's see that splint." The Mexican tossed a rope at a

group of horses in the shady half of the corral and they went milling round the enclosure. Blanco loped easily, ears up, eyes on the rope.

"Reckon he'll do. Reckon his splint's better this mornin'. That's yore hawss, Higgins. Git yore stirrups long enough. Thayer'll cinch him. So long."

As Slim turned away Thayer winked again at the hands and they climbed the rail. He whispered a word to the helper and the Mexican grinned and left the corral, returning with saddle, blanket, and bridle. Thayer flung his lariat with easy accuracy and the wise Blanco came out of the herd before the loop tautened. Blanco was feeling pretty fit from long disuse and anticipated an outing cheerfully. Bridle and blanket and saddle went on with swift precision and Higgins watched the fastening of the cinch with the latigo strap and two steel rings.

"Like fastening a necktie," he said. "I ought to manage that."

"We don't wear neckties on the range," said Thayer. "Leave 'em to the city dudes. You climb up on the left side, with yore left foot. Want I should send Pedro fo' a chair?" The lookers-on snickered, but Higgins did not look their way.

"I may need one to get down," he said good-humoredly. "But I'll tackle mounting without one."

He hoisted himself into the saddle in the manner of one calling on unused muscles. He was more stiff than awkward and swung into the seat without slouching or without any show of apprehension. Before he had settled his feet into the stirrups he noticed several things. Thayer was back to the fence, looking on expectantly, his helper was rolling his dark eyes toward the hands, who had taken on the look and attitude of a circus audience watching the rube try out the trained mule.

They grinned; the helper had his tongue stuck in his cheek. Thayer was sneering openly. Higgins

shoved his feet well into the hooded stirrups and shifted his weight before he let Blanco have the full benefit of his heft.

Blanco's ears rose, pricked, then settled back as his head suddenly went down toward his knees. Higgins jerked at the reins with swift suspicion, but he was too late to offset the steely play of the neck muscles. Instinctively he gripped hard with his knees, dug in his heels beneath the ribs of his mount. Blanco seemed to shrink away from him, withers and hips, knees giving as if he was minded to roll.

Then, like a bowstring, every sinew and tendon tensed, nose to dirt and legs rigid as posts of iron, Blanco bucked, with his back arched like that of an angry cat. He shimmied in midair and bucked again, coming down stiff-legged, jarring the Hen Herder from the base of his spine to the base of his skull as he parted company with the saddle and violently reconnected, side-slipping, clawing at horn and mane, up again and nearly off, while Blanco shook his stubborn head and squealed.

The lookers-on rocked with merriment. Higgins dimly heard their guffaws and saw their blurry, jeering faces through a cloud of corral dust.

He gripped leather, he broke every canon of riding, but, by good luck and an intuitive sense of balance, he stayed more or less astride, clutching desperately with hands and knees, his scarlet face looming through the choking dust like the sun in a fog. Blanco went through the half-forgotten repertoire of his youth, pitching, weaving, sunfishing, plunging. Horse and rider erratically neared the corral gate. A hand opened it and nearly fell down laughing as he started to scramble up to his rail again to avoid the caroming horse and rider—if Higgins could be so classed.

They lunged into the open. Higgins had not lasted long as time went. In no event could he have lasted much longer. His membranes tasted salt in his mouth

as the jolting surcharged the surfaces with blood. As he passed the gate Blanco flung up his head and his crest smashed against the Hen Herder's nose. Blood flew. Blanco got his head down again. The old horse was tiring, but indignantly determined to get rid of Higgins. It was years since he had mutinied against discipline, but he had a reason and a good one, though it was not yet manifest to Higgins.

The end came suddenly. Thayer had made a show of tightening the cinch by pressure of his knee against Blanco's ribs, but he had marveled that the saddle had not slipped before. Now Blanco's lungs were clogged, and he was incapable of full expansion, much as he needed breath. The girth side-slipped, the heavy saddle swung round, and Higgins was pitched to dirt with a thud. Blanco was too tired to kick at the saddle, but stood stock still, snorting, legs apart.

To Higgins the world was still a simoon swirl of choking dust of which he was the half-stunned core, when a man caught Blanco at the bridle at the same moment Foster came up on his big roan, reining in, looking sharply at Blanco as Higgins got to his feet, wiping away the blood from his damaged nose, limping a trifle. Pedro was reaching for the saddle when Foster checked him.

"I'll do that," he said, dismounting. "Who saddled up? You?"

The helper cringed, looked deprecatingly at Thayer, and seemed to take his cue.

"*Si, senor.*"

Foster spoke to Blanco, ran a soothing hand down his withers, found the cinch and loosed it. Higgins stood beside him.

"Bucked you off first thing, did he? Old Blanco? Started right in?"

"He sure thought he was an earthquake." Higgins was taking the matter in good part, it seemed. The

hands had disappeared. "Fessenden seemed to think he was tame, but he must have started off with the wrong hoof this morning."

"Humph!"

Foster scrutinized blanket and saddle closely as he slipped clear the latigo and then dragged the outfit to one side. Only Thayer was now in sight, leaning by the corral gate.

"Git Higgins another hawss," snapped Foster. "An' saddle him yoreself."

"Hold on," said Higgins quietly. "I'm goin' to ride that horse. I've taken a fancy to him. Honest."

Foster looked at him queerly with one eye half closed, a trick of the ranch-owner.

"All right, Higgins," he said. "Thayer!"

The buster came forward, his dark face sulky, and expertly saddled and cinched under the eyes of Foster. Higgins mounted once again. Blanco craned his neck toward the rider he had lately vanquished, but made no demonstration, moving off quietly as Higgins took up the reins. Then he broke into a cross between a walk and a jog that made Higgins bump badly but not perilously. Foster watched him and so did Mary, from the window of her father's office shack, where she was trying vainly to get a connection out of an overburdened party line. She could not resist a laugh, though she was annoyed when the Hen Herder turned and saw her through the panes. But he looked so utterly out of his bearings, bump-bumping between horn and cantle, with his dusty clothes, the trousers sliding up his leg, his bloodied nose and crimson face shiny with beads of sweat!

Foster stirred up the dirt with his foot, apparently looking for something. He seemed about to speak to Thayer, but checked himself and got on the road again, lighting a cigar before he loped off. Pedro came out from behind the corral post, watching him until he disappeared around the corner of a building. Then the

Mexican squatted in the dirt and searched it with his fingers. But what he and the Old Man had looked for, the one with suspicion and the other with certainty, was not there.

Higgins had it folded in a handkerchief. He had retrieved it while he was sprawling in the dust. It was a top leaf of prickly pear that Pedro had severed at Thayer's suggestion and deftly placed between blanket and saddle, whence it had fallen when the saddle slipped.

"I ain't hep to the ranching game, Blanco," soliloquized Higgins as he followed the directions given him earlier by Foster, at the Hen Herder's request, hitting trail for Owl Canyon, four miles distant, "but I've read a heap of Western fiction and I reckon it ain't all made up. I've known 'em use cockleburrs in scratch races back East and I sort of suspicioned something like that when you started to buck, old sport. They played it low down on both of us, but I'll get even for you, old warrior. Wonder if this is your best gait? You're no rocking chair. Ah——" as Blanco broke into a lope, seeing the open range—"that's better."

Owl Canyon was not the typical gorge into which one slowly descended. No torrent had gouged it from the soil. Its eroded cliffs rose abruptly and fantastically from the plain to an average height of two hundred feet, terraced irregularly, pitted with caves.

The sage ceased, giving way to alkali dirt, barren of all growth but stunted patches of cactus. The heat of the day was suddenly tempered by a draught that blew through the passage, a draught whose coolness was tainted by a faint, musky odor, not distinguished by Higgins, but strong and fearsome in the sensitive nostrils of Blanco, who balked and wheeled as the Hen Herder strove unskilfully to control him.

"Whoa, there, old sport, what's the trouble?"

He patted the horse's neck as it halted finally and stood snorting, its front legs trembling.

Higgins dismounted. He knew enough of Western lore to let the reins trail, and Blanco made no attempt to bolt, though he stood with ears pricked forward and head up, his eyes fixed on the shadowed canyon, snuffing and blowing out his nostrils. His alarm seemed to diminish with the distance.

"Funny," muttered Higgins, scanning the ravine and the top of its cliffs. "I reckon you've got mighty good sense and you know more about things out here than I do. It's a gloomy joint, Blanco, a fine-looking place for a hold-up, or a murder. You goin' to stand while I go and look? You are? Good. I'd hate to hoof it back to the ranch."

Blanco stood at gaze, watching him walk slowly toward the canyon, apparently content to remain where he was bridle anchored, obedient so long as he was not required to come closer to whatever had frightened him. Higgins figured that he was not a horse to be easily scared. There was a mystery about the place.

He entered the shadow that lay across the trail leading through the gorge, marked with tracks and occasional hoofmarks.

"Other horses go through here," Higgins mused. "Reckon I'm no expert or this trouble ain't a regular one. But I'm not much of a rider. He could have been handled. Slim, now, he'd have spurred him along. But it's funny, jus' the same."

He walked steadily ahead. The passage curved so that he could not see the end of it. To his right a stagnant pool lay cupped in a rocky basin. It was milky and there were crusts of alkali about the rim.

"No place for a picnic," muttered Higgins. His burned face smarted despite the shade, but his gray eyes showed keenly above the puffed cheeks. It was a little over a third of a mile through the gorge, he

reckoned, as he came to where the cliffs ended again and the barren plain reached out toward where the sage began again. Owl Canyon was a stricken area, yet it was inhabited.

On the lowest slopes prairie dogs sat at the entrance to their holes, surveying his approach and then bolting. In one burrow Higgins saw a small owl regarding him with eyes wide in the tempered light.

"Owl Canyon," he said. "Shucks! Now I know." He recollected what he had read—eagerly perusing his favorite Western literature at times when he wanted relaxation of mind and body—concerning the triple occupancy of gopher burrows—owl, prairie dog, and rattlesnake. Someone had dispelled the theory of amiability. The owl had wanted a burrow ready made, being of that species. The snake wanted the prairie dogs and, perhaps, the young owls. Further light broke on him. Returning slowly, closely looking over every foot of the place, his own nose perceived a disagreeable odor in the air. The sensitory nerves rushed the message to his brain and his will searched the records of his mind.

Rattlesnakes! They smelled of musk. He had noticed that in a zoo, in the circus, he had discussed it with a snake charmer. It had scared Blanco. He remembered the talk of the Ess-Eff riders about a man having been bitten looking for Ober's cache of loot.

He fancied the edges swarming with the coiled horrors, and he nerved himself to do what he had come for—see if he could find any trace of a hiding place.

It would be almost impossible, aside from the imminent risk, to search all the caves whose mouths showed blackly. Nevertheless, Higgins cautiously began to climb.

"A dandy hideout," he told himself, talking aloud. "A peach. Well guarded. But if a man chucked a sack of coin in here, how would he get it out again?

Dynamite? Might kill off the snakes, but it might bring down the cliff. It's rotten stuff," he added as a chunk of weathered tufa broke under his feet.

He was a quarter of the way up the cliff and so far had seen no snakes. The treachery of the rock made him lose his balance and instinctively he flung himself foward against the steepening slope, grabbing at a projection. That, too, gave way, but he had regained his poise. The fragment rolled crisply down the declivity with a metallic sound.

Instantly the air was filled with a whirring tremor of sound. Higgins stiffened. He could not place its direction. The noise strengthened, it seemed to surround him, to come even out of the rock on which he stood. Actually it was not loud, yet it thrilled in his ears like a rifle volley and he felt the fine hairs at the back of his neck lifting.

He looked up to a ledge a little above him. A flat head, shaped like a flatiron, venomous, threatening, was poised upon the inch or so of body that showed from his stance. He saw two beady eyes shining like jewels, an opened throat with two fangs erect in the upper jaw, a forked tongue quivering.

Water came into his mouth, nausea attacked him. It was involuntary, and he conquered it. Physical repulsion, ancient instinct tugged at his feet, but he deliberately made his way diagonally to the buttress that commanded the ledge, first tossing to its summit a few scraps of rock that he kicked loose. At the noise the quivering rattles thrilled louder.

The ledge he looked down upon was about five feet wide. Back of it was a low opening that he could not have observed during his climb. There was sun on the ledge. Presumably it was rock-paved, but barely an inch of it could be seen for a writhing mass of rattlers aroused by his clamber to the defense of their den. There were more snakes swarming within the opening. Out of the tangle of squirming bodies,

marked with the distinctive black rosettes, outlined with creamy white against an olive brown, more deadly and defiant heads lifted, some turning toward where the Hen Herder stood on his buttress. Tails vibrated with buttons buzzing too swiftly to distinguish the segments.

The rattlers were of all sizes, some of them prodigious to all Higgins's preconceived ideas. There were snakes as long as he was tall, almost as thick-girthed as his thigh. The musky taint seemed to fume up.

Higgins regarded them quietly now.

"Rattlesnake Pete would make a fortune there with snake-oil," he said. "If this is a sample, I've seen enough. And I reckon it's a good hunch. No one but a crazy man would hide swag up here, and a crazier go looking for it. Plenty of places, maybe, where there ain't snakes, but I don't believe that stuff was ever put here. Glad I saw it though, at that. A regular snake hell."

He climbed down and went back to Blanco. The wise old horse whinnied a welcome as if glad to see his rider return safely, glad to think he was going to leave. The Hen Herder led Blanco to a convenient rock for mounting and got into the saddle. Blanco broke into a lope. An hour later Higgins was fussing with the Barred Plymouth Rocks where Mary Foster found him when she came out for eggs at Wong's request.

She did not regard him with friendly eyes. He seemed such a pitiful misfit on a ranch. On a horse he had seemed even more ridiculous. But she was sorry for his burned face. He seemed to know all about chickens. They pecked about his scuffed yellow shoes as if they recognized him as a friend.

"How did you get so scorched?" she asked him, as he gave her the eggs she asked for. "You must be careful."

"It's getting better, miss," he answered cheerfully.

"Wind and sun did it, I reckon. It's pretty hard to hurt my face or improve it."

"You'd better let me give you some lotion for it."

"Don't you worry about that, miss. It'll come out all right. Peeling now. The new skin'll be smooth an' fine. There's women pay specialists all kinds of money to have the same thing done to 'em. On'y they don't have to shave," he added, ruefully touching the bristly beard that was becoming manifest, making him look more like a tramp than ever.

"Did you have a good ride?" she asked. There was something about his eyes that attracted her attention. They were strangely like her father's, she fancied.

"I'm a joke on a horse, miss. I'm not built for it, I reckon. Or I should have started young. I reckon you have to be born to ride like you do—or the men round here. Took a fancy to see the country a bit."

Mary turned away. She saw Lyman approaching and she felt a sense of embarrassment at being seen talking to a man she graded far below any of the riders. Higgins clucked to his charges.

"We'll have the Ess-Eff given Blue Ribbon for best pen all right," he said, as if she were still listening. "Mebbe for a bird or so. Next year we'll win the egg-laying contest. I'll do my best for you chickens, if you'll show any kind of gratitude."

"I don't see why father hired that man," the girl said to Lyman. "He seems to handle the chickens all right, but he's almost a scarecrow."

"It ain't much of an occupation for a he-man, looks like," said Lyman. "But that chap ain't no slouch. He can sure play poker. Did you see his eyes, Mary? I've a notion he's a real hombre, though it beats me how he can fool his time away with hens. Sort of a bug with him, I 'magine."

Mary shrugged her shoulders slightly and went in with the eggs gathered in the lap of her overall apron.

She did not question Lyman about Ober. She knew she was a favorite with the foreman, but she knew also that he would not disregard her father's instructions, inferred as well as actual.

Hen' looked after her admiringly. So did Higgins.

Mary had drawn blank on the telephone. The line seemed perpetually busy. The name Ober, that she had heard from her window the night before, lingered persistently somewhere in her memory like a dulled spark and she strove in vain to enliven it. But she decided to wait for evening and Slim. Meantime, she set about her sufficient tasks.

CHAPTER V

FOSTER rode in with Slim at five o'clock. They had inspected the blooded stock with a view to bringing them into nearer pastures until the Ober matter was settled. He would have to feed them for a few days, but the expense was offset by the risk of Ober meddling with them. The Ess-Eff territory was a hard one to patrol, especially at night.

He stopped on his way to the house for a chat with Higgins while Slim put both horses away, washed, slicked up, and took place with the other riders who had come in and were, as usual, roosting on the corral fence. Slim knew that Mary would pass presently, to pet her mare and give it some tidbits. He had had a confidential talk with Foster during their ride home and he knew that the Old Man was not averse to him as a son-in-law.

"It's up to Mary," he had said: "You ask her. You've got all the makin's of a first-class cattleman, Slim, and there's more money in it than ever. Beef's scarce and the tariff protects us. You suit me if you suit Mary."

And Slim had made up his mind to bring the question to an issue at the first chance. He was not sure of her answer, and he was chafed at the suspense. A man could ask more than once, he told himself.

Thayer was next to Slim on the rail, crooning into his mouth-organ at intervals.

"I'll be through breakin' end of the week," the buster volunteered. "Then I kin git on the range. Glad of it."

Slim was not responsive. He wondered a little why Thayer spoke to him. He had never encouraged talk with him.

"Think that Ober crowd'll show?" persisted the other.

"Hope so."

"Sure. Bet you ten they don't, though. All bluff."

"Mebbe. How'd Higgins make out?"

Thayer laughed.

"He got back. I'm savin' that fo' supper."

Slim glanced at him curiously. Then he saw Mary in fresh gingham, dainty, fresh, alluring, coming down the line with biscuits for her mare. She stood opposite to Slim.

"Will you come over for a while this evening, Slim? I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

Slim's heart jumped. The nearness of his proposal made him nervous, tongue-tied. Vexed at himself, he could only achieve a mumbled, "Sure," as she tripped away. Thayer nudged him.

"Kind of popular?"

Slim regarded the buster with a steady stare. Thayer laughed and started to play a fox-trot. The supper gong whanged before Mary came out of the barn where the mare, Mono, had the luxury of a box stall.

The Hen Herder slipped into his place at table quietly, answering the nods and howdys that proclaimed him acceptable to the mess. Badinage raked the long table into a crossfire. Little was said of Ober. The riders seemed to have dismissed him when they took off their guns. Thayer still wore his, Higgins noticed.

A lull came with the pie and Thayer took advantage of it.

"Ever see a circus?" he asked the man opposite him,

one of the hands who had watched Higgins ride the bucking Blanco.

"Not fo' a dawg's age. Why?"

"Becos you sure missed it to-day. You should have bin in the hawss corral this mornin'."

The man grinned. He was one of the few who catered to Thayer. All the men recognized his skill at breaking colts; a good many of them, like Slim, suspected him of brag and bluster where men were concerned.

The man played up to Thayer's lead.

"Tell us about it."

"Well, it was sure the original one-ring, high-falutin', sky-salutin' Mazeppa thriller. Me, I aim to ride a hawss once in a while, but I ain't no bareback perfawmer." Thayer noticed that Slim had stopped eating and was listening attentively. Others followed his example. Only Homer Higgins went on with his meal.

"That ol' skate Blanco, he sure did dance an' prance," continued Thayer. "Maybe he don't like the smell of chickens—like me. I jest natcherully despise a chicken an' anything to do with 'em unless they happen to wear long hair an' walk on two cute li'l laigs."

Everyone was grinning, a few laughing outright. All watched Higgins to see how he would take it, how far he would let the buster go. They were not ill natured about it. All of them had graduated in that school. They wanted to find out just how much of a man—according to their standards—there was in the Hen Herder. That Thayer, working up to a climax, encouraged by the appreciation of his audience, would deliver an ultimate insult that could not be tolerated, was a foregone conclusion.

"The circus was all over too soon," said Thayer. "I'd have paid good money to see a second performance, but I reckon it was sort of impromtoo.

The performer didn't have much use for the stirrups, but, one time, he comes down all standin' in one of 'em an' it was more'n the cinch c'ud stand. The saddle turns an' off he goes, like a hoptoad divin' off'n a rock. Then he starts eatin' dirt. Seemed to take to it natcheral."

"There's worse things to eat than dirt, Thayer." Higgins spoke at last, his eyes clear and steady, his voice even.

"Is there? You got to show me. It all depends how you bin brought up. Did any of that grit you chewed up stick in yore craw?"

Here was the challenge and the grinning faces stayed as if a photographer had shouted to them to hold the pose.

Slim caught a glimpse of Higgins's eyes. The pupils were no bigger than hemp seeds, glittering points of jet.

The Hen Herder leaned forward and spoke down the table to Thayer.

"You're packing a pair of guns, Thayer?"

"I sure am."

"Do you know how to fight without 'em? Just man to man?"

"You aimin' to tackle me bare-handed, you chicken-wrastler?"

Thayer's tone was sneering. Higgins, in answer, was cold as the draught from a glacier. He took something from his shirt pocket, wrapped in a neckerchief, unfolded the wrapping, and exhibited the contents.

"I found this bit of cactus that had been stuck under the horse's blanket," he said. "I don't mind furnishin' a little entertainment. Seems I did this mornin'. I propose to furnish a little more to the rest of you who weren't present. Seems to me Thayer's rubbed in his joke till it's threadbare. This is what I meant might be worse to eat than dirt."

He held up the cactus.

"If you've got the guts to come out on the floor,

Thayer, bare-handed, catch-as-catch-can, no holds barred, do your damndest till you're licked; I aim to make you eat this sticker you put under my saddle, an' then play the Dead March on that mouth harp of yours. Are you game?"

He stood up, aggressive and ready. A shout went up from all the table, and Thayer stood with him, snarling. Pedro got up with him.

"You git out of this, Pedro," said Slim.

"Me, I maka second for heem."

"You want a second?" Slim asked Higgins.

"All I want is a referee to see we start fair an' that Thayer isn't packin' concealed weapons. You'll know when one of us is through."

He stuffed the prickly pear segment back into his hip pocket, protected by the neckerchief, and requested the men nearest him to search him for weapons. Others had already done the same by Thayer. Slim started to extend the precaution to Pedro, then changed his mind and ordered the half-breed out. He demurred.

"This is a white man's affair," Slim told him curtly. "You may not have slipped that cactus in this mornin', but I'll bet ten dollars you were the one who got it. Greasers don't help to play jokes on white men on the Ess-Eff. If you don't *sabe* that, you'd better *sabe* it *pronto*. You don't bunk here, anyway. *Vamose!*"

Pedro went out unwillingly, aided by a final boot toe, and they saw his swarthy face pressed to the window. Thayer's lips were drawn back from his teeth in a wolf grin and he fumbled nervously with his shirt sleeves as he sought to roll them up. Two men valeted him in that. The table was pushed to one side, space made for the combatants. Thayer took off his high-heeled boots, made for corral work and not for side-stepping. Higgins removed his yellow "towny" shoes.

Slim, as referee, took the middle of the space, and the principals were held by friendly arms at either end. There was a bigger group back of Higgins than with Thayer. They had liked the way the Hen Herder had "spoke his li'l piece," they liked the quality of his voice and wouldn't be sorry to see Thayer licked, though they doubted whether Higgins had not been a bit ambitious in the announcement of his programme.

Thayer's bare forearms were corded with muscle. He was hard as nails and his daily battles and tugs of war with refractory colts at the end of a lariat or between the vise of his knees and thighs had conditioned him perfectly. There was not much to choose in size, reach, or weight, but Higgins's scorched face seemed ready to bleed at a pat, and the contrast between his arms, white from elbow to cuff line, red-brown of hands and wrists, looked as if he were wearing a white sweater.

Neither man was fighting because he liked to fight for the sheer love of it. First Higgins and then Thayer had been taunted into it. Thayer was evidently working himself into a rage, much as some animals will. As long as the rage endures, the strength and the capacity to receive punishment will be maintained until the blood vessels are clogged and the tissues poisoned by their efforts to handle the excess supply, or their whole system is short circuited by a well-delivered blow. Such fighters are hard to wear down and always dangerous. Neither of these—range rider and bronco buster, or herder of hens—might be supposed to show science. And science itself avails little unless protected by prize ring rules.

Higgins's white arms were hard enough. The knowing one noted that his hips, for all his bulky shirt, were far less in girth than his deep, rounded chest. His shoulders, if they sloped, were wide. And he had plenty of confidence in himself. He had a capacity that could furnish him with dynamic outbursts of

full strength that he could control at will, and the first minute showed him an adept at rough-and-tumble methods. He had very evidently not spent all his days around henhouses.

"Let 'em go!"

As Slim shouted, the holders released their men and Higgins went forward with a sort of dancing step to meet the rush of Thayer. The buster covered his space in two jumps, whirling sideways as he landed from the second, bringing one arm across his face for a backhander that might strike with elbow or forearm bone. The force of this brought him face to face with Higgins, at whom he aimed a vicious blow with his left, deliberately low.

Higgins's head went back and the forearm swept past. His right hand gripped the right wrist of Thayer and he turned his back on him like lightning, his left hand joining his right, heaving Thayer off his feet for a smashing toss over his shoulder.

Thayer had experienced this counter before. His legs calipered about Higgins's middle, he drummed with his heel to disable Higgins in the crotch while he tried to throttle him with his left forearm. Failing this, with Higgins's chin deep sunk in his chest, Thayer's left hand clawed at the Hen Herder's face, tearing and gouging at his eyes. His nails had scraped through the tender, puffed flesh already and left bloody and half-watery scores.

It was not pretty. Slim had crouched down on the top of the table and the others leaned forward—not a man of them smoking or doing anything but watching the rapid swirl of the fight. A yell came from Thayer. Higgins had set his teeth in the ball of the buster's thumb as he tossed back his head. He could not shake off Thayer, who clung like the Old Man of the Sea, but he seemed to take a leaf from the buster's experience. Like a plunging horse—perhaps Blanco had furnished the idea—like a rearing mustang,

Higgins flung himself backward to the floor, all his weight on the astounded Thayer.

Thayer's spine and the back of his head hit with a resounding thump. The wind was nearly knocked out of him. His grip relaxed and Higgins turned in a flash, twisting like an eel, striving to get across his opponent's chest to pin down his arms. An upward thrust from Thayer's knee caught him high and hard in the groin and he was blinded with the swift stab of the agony. Then the spectators saw, without distinguishing of persons, a whirling fury of heaving bodies and flailing arms, of knees and feet that sought for a fulcrum, glimpses of rolling eyes and teeth in open mouths that emitted grunts of desperate breathing. They rolled from the wall to the bench close against the pushed-back table, then to the wall again. There, for a moment, the two forms were almost motionless, interlocked, straining every muscle, testing holds, wrestling for a chance to choke or smash an end to it.

The deadlock held. The onlookers kept their places, craning forward, hardly breathing, all eyes straining from their sockets to where the two men lay in a hateful embrace under the light.

There was a heave and the two bodies rolled apart as if by mutual impulse. They lay face uppermost, exhausted for the moment, their chests working like blacksmiths' bellows, arms outspread, knees drawn up, side by side.

Higgins's face looked as if it had been flayed. Blood was all over the front and the sleeves of his khaki shirt, on his opponent's chest.

One of the sleeves of Thayer's shirt was ripped clear from the shoulder. The folding roll had stopped the tear and now the cloth had slipped down to his wrist and bunched fist. The front of his shirt was buttonless. It looked as if Higgins had been deliberately striving to tear the clothes from him.

Higgins turned over on his face suddenly, contracted on all fours, and seemed to snap to his feet. Thayer drew his legs up under him, palms on the floor, and got up from squat to upright at the same second. They were both badly winded yet. Thayer tried for a cinch, clumsily, and Higgins caught and set aside the outstretched arms, gliding past, turning, as Thayer whirled with a light left to the jaw, for a whizzing attempt at an uppercut that crashed against Thayer's hastily up-flung guard of his right arm while his left shot out straight and hard. It missed Higgins's dodging head by an inch while, with a thud that sounded like a drumbeat, the Hen Herder slugged Thayer over the heart and sent him back reeling and gasping.

Higgins was after him, breaking down the feeble guard. Then, while the crowd watched to see him set, to see the knockout blows, Higgins wound his arms about the other's ribs, back-heeled him, and brought him crashing down.

An "Ah-h!" of disappointment went up. The Henman might have finished the fight there and then if he had only kept his head. But they were not averse to more. Thayer's arms shot out, clutching for the throat.

Higgins seemed to have the same idea but, to the spectators, inching forward, he seemed to have lost his head. His fingers were gripping, not at Thayer's windpipe, but were twined in the collar of his undershirt.

The Hen Herder's head was flung back, trying to keep his throat from the buster's clamp. His face now was a mask of blood that dripped off his skin. Thayer's desperate fingers raked his neck, thumbs pressing toward the jugular. It seemed as if Higgins was blinded with blood, out of his head with pain. He jerked backward and his hands, tearing apart, tore undervest and shirt aside, exposing Thayer's hairy breast.

His grip loosened, shifted to Thayer's wrists, and with a prodigious effort he broke the choking hold. His eyes were bulging from that frenzied clutch, his head drooped as if he had spent his reserves, sagged until it almost rested on Thayer's heaving chest; he was still hanging to Thayer's wrists, forcing back his arms until the elbows touched the floor.

Suddenly Higgins bellowed and hitched forward, sitting fairly on the barrel of Thayer's ribs. Back went Thayer's forearms, back and out until each arm was outstretched, pinioned by a knee on either biceps.

The Hen Herder's left hand had Thayer round the thick throat now, squeezing till the knuckles showed white, forcing still farther open the bruised jaws and swollen, bloodied lips. His right hand hitched back to his hip pocket.

The riders and the ranch hands whooped as they saw his purpose. He shook the cactus segment from the neckerchief, groped for it, shaking his head to get the blood and sweat out of his eyes, secured it and thrust it at Thayer's mouth.

The buster rocked his head from side to side to avoid the prickly contact, and Higgins, with his fingers sunk deep between gullet and windpipe, lifted the bully's head and banged it against the planks, twice, thrice! It sounded sickeningly. A man jumped out, but Slim waved him back.

"He'll kill him!"

"Not him. Leave 'em alone. Thayer asked for it."

The fight was out of the horse breaker. His face was purpling with congested blood, his eyes, outstarting, looked like the eyes of a dead fish. His jaws slackened, but not until he had thrust the bit of cactus fairly inside the gaping mouth did Higgins relax his grip.

Then he got up, reeling, panting.

"The damn thing got squashed," he gasped. "But I fed it to him. Where's his mouth harp?"

He was a fearful sight, staggering blindly toward the table, falling across the bench, collapsing with his head on his arms, but raising it again. His speech was hardly intelligible.

Thayer lay prone and still save for twitching limbs. Someone ran over to the cookshack for water, thrusting Pedro stumbling to one side, and came back with a bucket, followed by Short, the fat chef of the ranch help.

He set the bucket on the floor and deluged Thayer with water, lifting the heavy head on its limp neck. Slim, down from the table, retrieved Higgins's neckerchief, soaked it, and brought it to its owner, who wiped his tender, tortured face and showed his eyes, gleaming indomitably.

"Where's that mouth harp?" he demanded. "He can play it, damn him! Cactus barely pricked him. It was all pulp."

They thronged about him, praising him, dissuading him.

"You licked him right, old-timer. He's had enough. Hell, yu've ha'f killed him. His mouth is a mess."

"He'll play it in the mornin' then," said Higgins doggedly. "For God's sake, cookie, give me some grease for my face. It's on fire. Clean grease; make it lard."

He sat on the bench, gingerly applying the wet cloth, groaning despite his efforts to repress it.

A flask of crude whisky was produced. Thayer was choking over the fiery stuff as it burned his torn lips and trickled down his squeezed throat, coughing, lying with head and shoulders on a rider's lap.

"It's bunks for both of you," said Slim. "Put 'em to bed, boys. Don't let Thayer have his guns. I don't believe he'll start gunplay," he added to Higgins. "I'll have a talk with him."

"I'll handle that end of it," said Hen' Lyman, reasserting the authority he had waived. "There'll be no shooting. Fair fight and fair licking. I think you've taken the sting out of that snake, pardner."

And he shook Higgins by the hand.

The response was feeble, but Higgins's torn face showed pleasure at his recognition.

"Where's that lard?" he demanded.

"Comin'." The cook fussed in, Pedro with him, casting a venomous glance at Higgins before he went to assist Thayer to his feet. The foreman caught the halfbreed by the elbow.

"No Greaser tricks," he growled. "You're out of this, first and last, or you git yore time an' walk off the ranch. You'll be too sore to ride. *Sabe?*"

Slim aided Higgins to get off his clothes and into his bunk, where he held the lard while the Hen Herder smeared his features with the soothing grease.

"I've got to go now," said Slim. "Anything more I can do for you, old-timer? 'Nother shot of hootch?"

Higgins shook his head. He had relaxed and he was about beyond speech; his face throbbed beneath the lard. His muscles were wrenched and his tendons strained. There was a distinct stiffness held over from the experience with Blanco. He was very tired and for the time, content.

"I don't blame you," said Slim. "It sort of explodes in the mouth. Gasolene an' prune juice, I'll say."

CHAPTER VI

He got his guitar and went over to the moonlit porch, where he saw Mary seated. There was a faint perfume of violets about her. Her white dress, the candid and demure look in her eyes, invested her with such an atmosphere of dainty maidenhood that Slim, considering all the stunts that he had pulled, felt his courage oozing from him.

"I thought you were too busy to come over," she said. "I was just about to go in. Dad's over to his office and I was lonesome."

Slim was reduced to subjection.

"I wanted to come before," he said. "I couldn't come right away."

"I heard shouting. Were you gambling?" Usually she called poker by its right name. Slim felt faint hostility in the air.

"No. There was a bit of a row, and I was referee."

"Oh, I see. There was a fight, and though you wanted to come, you had to referee it. I hope it was entertaining."

Slim sulked and started tuning his guitar.

"Who was it?" she persisted.

"Bud Thayer started to josh Higgins about ridin' Blanco this mornin'. An' he got a mite too personal."

"You don't mean that you let Higgins fight Thayer? You ought to have been ashamed of yourselves. Higgins is harmless enough. I was feeling sorry for him this afternoon. I laughed when I saw him on Blanco, and I was ashamed of myself later on."

Slim snorted. "Harmless. So is wildcats. I was ashamed of myself for not stoppin' the fight. Harmless? Harmless as fork lightning, and nigh as quick. He's a human he-bearcat, is Homer Higgins. They'll stop callin' him the Hen Herder of this outfit. He's hell on wheels when it comes to a rough an' tumble. He looks soft, but he's laced up with muscle. He got his face mussed up some, account of its bein' all pappy from sunburn, but if you don't believe me when I tell you he's a humdinger from Hades, you take a slant at Thayer next time he takes the air. An' that won't be termorrer."

"Higgins! Whipped Thayer?"

"Whipped him an' hogtied him with the lash to boot." Slim went into a description of the fight, and the girl leaned forward with those eyes alight, her hands clinched into tight little fists.

"Don't see why he didn't finish him when he first got atop of him," concluded Slim. "'Stead of tearin' at his clothes. I reckon that was one time Thayer had him a bit groggy. But it was Higgins's fight all the way through. The boys'll be watchin' Thayer to sort of persuade him not to get funny with his guns. An' Pedro with his knife, either. Pedro's Thayer's shadder. Higgins is a whale with his fists, but he wouldn't have the chance of a blind hawg in a blizzard when it comes to gunplay. I'd sure hate to have to beat Thayer to the draw an' he shoots straight. I've seen Pedro throw his knife five times at an ace, clear across the bunkhouse, an' cut the pip to bits."

"You'll keep them from Higgins?"

"The boys would lynch the pair of 'em. They'll be good. An' Higgins can look out for himself right smart."

"Poor Higgins."

"How?" Slim felt a twinge of jealousy.

"I mean so far as guns are concerned. Dad says

he is going to make him home-guard against the bandits."

"The bandits?" Slim gasped at her change of base.

"I heard you talking to dad last night. And Perley. And all you boys wearing two guns. Dad told me something about it, but he was in a hurry. Slim, who's Ober? I remember the name."

Slim was enmeshed, guiled by Eve. He naturally thought her father had talked the thing over with her. But he parried.

"The Old Man told us to keep quiet about it. He said he was thinking of sending you away."

"Well, he's changed his mind. I'm to cut out my rides. And dad wouldn't include me in your not talking. Who's Ober?"

"He's the bank thief we caught the time you were away."

"Oh!" Recollection lighted the girl's eyes. "I remember now. I read about it in the papers. I wrote to dad about it, but he didn't answer. He said this morning they were heading this way. Why? To get even with dad?"

Slim nodded.

"I'd like to see dad get me to leave! I'm not afraid. Would you protect me, Slim?"

Here was another swift change. The situation was swinging his way again. Slim took a deep breath and gulped. Real emotion gripped him. The girl appraised him with heightening color. She knew that Slim was in love with her, that she was his one woman, to defend, to live for. And still her intuition told her that, sweet as this was, she was not quite in love with him—yet.

"I'd give my life for you, Mary!"

There was silence. She laid her hand on his and his strong fingers closed about it. But she was not ready for surrender. Her thoughts of Slim were

divided with the excitement concerning Ober. Higgins was there, too. Events were happening too fast for single emotion.

"That was dear of you, Slim," she said softly.

She put her exact mood into the tone of her reply, and Slim, sensitive to every shade of passion in that moment, never a fool, knew where he stood. To go farther would set him back. He took his hand away.

The moon, shifting through the screen of vines, showed Mary's face friendly but lacking either invitation or response to the swift desire that rose to take her in his arms. He got the husks out of his voice and started to sing.

"The moon behind the mountain,
Has gone to rest—gone to rest.
The silver's left the fountain,
The birds are close in nest,
The world's asleep, but I, love,
Keep watch and ward, awake,
Seeking a chance to prove, love,
My manhood for thy sake."

It was a Spanish *cantinela* that Mary had herself put into English. Slim was serving himself better than he knew.

"The stars that pin Night's curtain,
Like holy candles burn,
And heavenward, uncertain,
My thoughts toward thee turn;
To where, secure, you're dreaming,
I wonder, if you dream
Of me, my vigil keeping,
Till dawn shall palely gleam."

Mary Foster was a red-blooded girl. Her life had hitherto failed to live up to her day-dreams of romance. Now, of a sudden, she was living it. The moonlight shifted again. It shone on Slim's brown, lean, handsome face. It touched the pearl insets of the fretted neck of his guitar. He fitted her mood. But so did the thought of the outlaws riding somewhere under the stars; murderous, revengeful men. So, somehow, did the Hen Herder, with his battered face, battling against Thayer, overcoming him. She was grateful to Higgins for that. What a caricature he was! She wondered whether Higgins were romantic. And she laughed lightly. Slim put down his guitar, hurt. He had put his heart into the song.

"Will you come in, Slim?" she asked, realizing that he was offended. "I'll play for you to pay for that song, if you like. You sang it beautifully. And we'll rout out Wong and have a rarebit."

The rarebit jarred on Slim. The evening had gone awry. She just didn't care for him. And he had his pride.

"Guess I'll be getting back. Got to see after Higgins. That face of his might git poisoned. Thayer's nails ain't sterilized much, I reckon. I got some candy for you in town last night. Here it is."

He hadn't forgotten her, then, in the excitement of the *Herald's* announcement. She opened the box, offering it to him. He refused the candy, rolling a cigarette which he did not immediately light.

"Good-night," he said.

"Good-night, Slim."

"You said you wanted I should do something for you. What is it?"

"Did I say that, Slim? I've forgotten. Anyway, you came. Is there anything I can do for Higgins?"

She applied salve and hurt at the same time, Slim thought. "Why the interest in Higgins?"

"You might reason with your dad. I reckon he won't be over pleased to know Thayer's all mussed up."

"I will. Good-night. Thanks for the candy."

"Good-night." Slim's voice was grave; he was on his dignity as he lit his cigarette, picked up his guitar and went down the steps.

CHAPTER VII

HIGGINS awoke the next morning aching from top to toe. The bunkroom was empty. Even Thayer had gone. It was anguish for him to move, and his face, despite the lard, burned like fire. He had tossed most of the night and fallen asleep somewhere in the small hours to lie as if drugged while the riders had dressed and gone out quietly.

The sun showed him that it was not very late, and he crawled out with every inch of him protesting. He was only half dressed when the door opened and Slim looked in.

"Thought you might sleep a bit," he said. "I came back for my second-string horse. The buckskin wrenched a foot in a badger hole. You think you'd better get up? Way your face looks you might better go into town and have Doc Smalley overhaul it. You could go in on the stage. Or there's the car. It'll be all right with the Old Man. I was talking with him about the fuss, and I told him it was forced on you. He seemed to wish he'd seen it. Cookie'll get you some breakfast. Better call it an off day."

"There's a whole lot of me in working order yet," said Higgins. "And the chickens have got to be 'tended to."

"Miss Foster did that already. Saw her feeding them."

"Hm! She know about the fight, too?"

"Main topic of conversation on the ranch. Matter of fact, I reported it to her last night. She wanted

to know if there was anything she could do for you."

"That's mighty good of her. But I'm all right now I'm started. I reckon I can turn out if Thayer can."

Slim grinned. "I don't reckon he's workin' much to-day. An' he got up mainly because he figgered the atmosphere in here sort of close. He was awake when I got up, though he pretended to be asleep. The boys were on to him, and they sort of back-fired on him. He's in the corral with that Greaser helper of his, Pedro. Say, there's an emergency kit in here. Salve and bandages and stuff. You don't want to go out in the sun with your face thataway. Thayer's ain't pretty, but he wan't sunburned to commence with."

He got the medical kit and left Higgins making use of it. When the Hen Herder appeared in the full light of day, a little island of crimson face was bounded above the eyebrows, immediately below the mouth to either side of lines drawn from the outer corners of his eyes to those of his lips, by white strips. He was bandaged like an old-time corpse. His nose had almost completely peeled and there was a nasty scratch across the bridge. Fortified by breakfast, for which he found ample appetite, he pottered about the chickens. Foster had gone off early again. The hands were in the sheds. The ranch seemed deserted, save that the sound of a piano came from the ranch-house.

There was no regular noon meal on the Ess-Eff for employees. The riders, cowboy fashion, ate a hearty meal of meat, biscuits, coffee, and griddle cakes that lasted them through the day while they were on the range. The helpers, with Thayer, when he was breaking colts, had a pickup cold lunch which Higgins shared.

Higgins showed for this meal. His stiffness had

worn off with exercise, and the salve he had found in the kit was doing good work under the protecting bandages. Thayer and Pedro did not put in an appearance. The helpers regarded Higgins with a new respect. His wrappings were badges of prowess.

After eating, Higgins saw Blanco standing near the corral fence, and strolled over to speak to him. Blanco condescended to recognize him, but refused to have his head scratched or stroked. He still seemed to regard Higgins, so the Hen Herder fancied, as one who did not understand horses and was not to be trusted with familiarity.

Higgins wondered where the car mentioned by Slim was kept. He had not known there was one on the ranch and he wanted to see it. He imagined it was located in one of the sheds; his duties gave him quite a little spare time, and he started to investigate. Passing between two buildings, he heard voices as he came to the corner of a shed. Instantly he flattened and, cat-footed, inched his way along. There was no need to peer round the corner; he recognized the voices, but he was minded to take a look at their owners and listen to their talk.

He looked about him and edged back between the buildings to a door which he opened with infinite caution and stole in silently. The shed was almost filled with farming machinery, and he made his way through this to a ladder leading to an upper floor stacked with bales of alfalfa. At the far end there was a sliding door through which the hay was hoisted by pulley and beam. The door was open for ventilation, and Higgins tiptoed close toward it and then wriggled along till he could look cautiously down.

Thayer and Pedro were seated on a bench beneath him, talking in close confab. Higgins already knew that he was the subject of their conversation, but he hoped they might change the topic. He deliberately and literally eavesdropped. He almost emitted a

chuckle as Thayer, looking sideways, showed the results of the fight. His face looked like the gargoyle carving of a demon, bruised and battered, the nose swollen, an ear cauliflowered, his mouth a grotesque. It was plain that the playing of a mouth organ was a present impossibility, if Higgins had persisted in his desire for the Dead March.

The buster's eyes gleamed in their narrowed slits as the light caught them.

"*Caramba!*" said Pedro, as he made a thrusting gesture ending in a twist that needed no knife in his dirty hand to show its significance. "That ees what he need. So! To turn eet in his guts."

"An' git strung up for it. I'll wait."

"Wait? W'ile they make laugh on you?"

"I'm gittin' even," said Thayer doggedly, "but I choose my own time. He's a pet of the Old Man right now, 'count of them chickens. I've got reasons for stayin' on the Ess-Eff a while. D'ye suppose I'd have stood for what the Old Man said to me this mornin' if it warn't for that? It'll keep. When I git my chance, he'll wish he was in hell before he mixed in with me."

"Ah. *Bueno.* I see. Señor Thayer, one time I see a man tie to a wild horse. They tie one han' to that horse's tail, one foot to hees foot. The horse he ees bandage weeth a blin'. They take off that blin', they geev heem the quirt. An' he commence to keek. *Dios!*

Thayer's evil face twisted into a fiendish grin.

"You're all right, Pedro," he said. "You've got some fine ideas. An' we might try 'em."

The bandaged face of Higgins could show no emotion, but his eyes grew hard and cold as he listened to the amiable plans for his fate. Then Pedro got up, doffing his sombrero. Thayer remained seated. Mary Foster came into view. She was about to pass without speaking, but Thayer rose when she was opposite.

"I'd like to draw some money," he said in a surly tone. "I've got to go to town. Pedro'll go with me."

"This afternoon?" she asked.

"I'm not workin'. Yore father knows that. There's money comin' to me. I've got an infected lip."

Mary remembered Slim's details of the fight. Thayer's excuse was a sufficient one. It was customary to make advances. She considered the matter with a little frown.

"I'd rather you'd wait until my father came back." she said.

"The drug store'll be closed time we git there."

"I'll make you out a check for twenty dollars," she said finally. "You don't seem to be in shape for work."

Thayer scowled, but said nothing.

"Why didn't you speak to my father about going in?" she asked him.

"He warn't over good-humored at the time. An' I was feelin' better than I am now. I got to git my mouth fixed up."

"You are coming back to-night?"

"I'll be on time termorrer mornin'." This was his privilege.

"Very well. Come over to the office." She walked off, the two following. Higgins lay where he was for a few minutes, a double verticle crease on his forehead showing below the bandage. He seemed to come to a decision and make his way back to the ground and his chicken-yard. Presently he saw Thayer and Pedro gallop off on their horses. He walked over toward the ranch-house where Mary Foster was seated on the veranda, busy with a sewing basket. She looked up as he reached the foot of the steps. There was interest in her eyes and no amusement as she surveyed the stocky figure and the

bandaged face. "Laced up with muscle," Slim had said. And he had whipped Thayer.

"Do you want to go to town, too, Higgins?" she asked. "Thayer has gone in—to see a doctor, I think."

The Hen Herder's eyes showed a certain relief as if a problem had suddenly revealed an easier opening than he anticipated.

"I'd like to, miss," he answered, "but I don't believe I could ride in, not on a horse."

"The stage has passed."

"I can drive a car," he said. "Most any make of car. I heard there was one on the ranch."

The girl's eyes widened. She had spoken in kindness, but she had not expected such a reply.

"There is only one car on the ranch," she said. "Mine."

Nominally this was fact. The car, a roadster, was supposed to belong to Mary, but it was used for ranch purposes in getting swiftly to town and back. They were still, above all, horsemen on the Ess-Eff, but there were times when gasoline, translated into horsepower, was plainly superior. But Mary was the only one who drove it. Her father refused steadily to use it, though he ran gas engines for his lights and pumps, for fuel, for feed, and in his tractor. But his ideas of a cattleman prohibited him being seen at the wheel of a car.

The girl's tone held amazement. It was evident she considered the matter closed.

"I'm a good driver, miss," Higgins persisted. "If I could borrow it? It's quite important."

She looked at him as if she could barely credit the impertinence, rose, taking her sewing with her to the door.

"You'll have to see my father," she said coldly. "I do not care to let you have it unless he says so." She went inside, leaving Higgins looking perplexed and stubborn. He shook his bandaged head.

"It takes a woman to block the game every time," he said cryptically as he walked slowly away.

An hour later Stephen Foster came back alone, and Higgins intercepted him, talking earnestly.

"You fit to handle it?" Foster asked finally.

"Sure. I've got to handle it."

"I'll see Mary. Want me to go with you?"

"No. I'll have to make it alone."

Foster strode off to the ranch-house and Higgins, returning to the bunkhouse, did a curious thing for a man about to take a long ride. He divested himself of his bandages and smeared his face copiously with the salve, slipping the rest of it into his pocket. In the house, Mary was arguing with her father.

"I don't want you to leave the ranch," he said. "Higgins is as good a driver as you are."

"How do you know that?"

"I happen to. He'll prove it to you."

"But there can't be any danger between here and Saugus. Those men can't be near here yet. You said so yourself."

"I'm taking no chances. They are not wasting time. They may have commandeered a car themselves, stolen it, killed the owner, abandoned it and taken to horses again. Stolen them. They are on their way. Ober is a vicious character. But he's riding into his destruction this trip."

The girl looked at her father intently. She had seldom seen him in this mood. Never quite so stern and purposeful, and he spoke as if he were certain of the outcome of future events. Hitherto she had seen only the romance, the adventure of the situation. Now the tragedy of it obtruded itself. It made her thoughtful.

"I don't want you out after dark, Mary," he said with finality. "As for Higgins—you'll come to know him better. But if you think he can't handle the car he shan't have it. Come on."

Her interest in Higgins revived. From a pitiful nondescript he was showing character, force. There was a certain spice of mystery about him. She forgot his apparent ungainliness because there was strength back of it.

And it was very evident he knew all about cars. He asked her one or two pertinent questions, filled the tank, turned up the grease cups, made a brief inspection of the engine, and asked her to get in as if he suspected her doubts. He shifted the gears more smoothly than ever she had done, backing and turning smartly and bringing the purring machine up to the porch steps. In his shabby clothes, with his glaring face beneath the shapeless hat, still somehow he did not appear incongruous in the smart roadster. She watched him speed down the road to the ranch gate, turn into the highway like a racer, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Stephen Foster was distraught. He did not seem to hear her when she spoke, and she respected his attitude. The foreshadow of happenings of serious, menacing import darkened her own mood.

CHAPTER VIII

LATE at night the car came roaring back. Her father awoke. He came out on the porch, and after a brief greeting, Mary heard the two men walking away, and saw a light in the little office shack. Foster was not at breakfast. He had taken a hasty cup of coffee, Wong told her, and left the ranch before the sun was well up. She inspected the car. The tank was down less than a gallon. Her eyes opened wide as she noted the mileage. Higgins had driven far.

Thayer and Pedro were back, working with the colts. When she saw Higgins, his bandages had been replaced by a strip or two of adhesive, holding in place pads of absorbent cotton. He was whistling as he fussed with the poultry.

Slim did not appear that evening. There were three riders missing from the perch on the corral rail when she went to pet her mare. Thayer, a little apart, leered at her.

She wanted to ask Higgins a few questions, to try to draw him out, but she did not care to appear uninformed, not in her father's full confidence. The day had dragged. The feeling of impending trouble had deepened. The riders greeted her, but they wore an air of unusual gravity backed by a suggestion of satisfaction. Lyman, too, was more reticent than his wont. Foster came in tired and silent. After supper he lit a cigar and broached the subject she was dying to open up.

"We've heard news that Ober and his crowd were seen over by Caroca Creek. Sheepherder says he

saw 'em. Took good care they didn't see him. Higgins brought the news. They've made good time. They're liable to be here inside of twenty-four hours.

"We're patrollin' the ranch from now on, day an' night. It's a big territory. Higgins'll stay close to home. He's no good on hawssback, an' I don't see much chance of danger here. They'd never dare to tackle the ranch-house by daylight, even if they got through our cordon. The herd's the likeliest thing for them to strike at. An' night's their best time for that. I'll be home termorrer night, with Slim. There'll be some of the boys up termorrer, sleepin' after night-herdin'. Of course, we've wired the penitentiary people erbout our tip. I reckon they'll be erlong. Though there's no tellin'. They may have clues of their own. If they come, it's up to you to feed 'em, so long as you're stickin'. I'd have been easier if you'd gone in to Ma Perley's."

"You just said there was no danger, dad."

"Don't believe there is, so long as you stick to the house. Perley's over to Owl Canyon. He figgers the money's buried there, an' he's waitin' fo' them to show. We're to git word to each other, soon's we git news. I'm off ternight."

The day passed without happening, save that the ranch work seemed suspended, a sure sign that Foster was expecting trouble. Late in the afternoon a warden's posse arrived and had supper in the ranch-house. Foster took them over to his office and produced a big map of his holding. Lyman and Higgins joined the conference.

"There's the two readiest ways fo' them to come in," said Foster, marking the spots on the blueprint. "But you can't tell. They'll figger we're watching those."

"Where's this Owl Canyon where the sheriff is?" asked the man in charge of the posse.

"Over this way, four miles."

"I'll send two men over there."

"Higgins has been there. He thinks it's a blind draw.

The warden's men looked curiously at Higgins. Hitherto they had ignored him, imagining him a subforeman, though his clothes belied it. That none of them considered him important was patent in the way they glanced his way.

"I'm representing the Bankers' Protective Association," said Higgins. His drawl was gone, he spoke crisply, and the men sat up in their chairs at his announcement.

"Higgins is my name on the ranch," he went on, "Homer Higgins. My real name is John Boyd."

There was respect now in the glance of the leader of the posse.

"I've heard of you," he said.

"I came here direct to the ranch soon as we got news at headquarters by wireless," said Higgins. "By Ober's record I believe he's going to try and wipe out his score against Foster here, though, as a matter of fact, Foster saved his life when he stopped his men from lynching him. Foster gave me a clear hand so far as my own notions were concerned. I keep chickens in my own home and make a speciality of 'em, so I hired to look after Foster's flock. I've been trailing the local end of this affair, and I covered myself best way I could. To let out there was a detective in the field would have spoiled things. I've a notion the two men that got away here were local, and I've another notion they had something to do with this escape, that they've been in communication with Ober, are now, more or less, and that they aim to play a part in whatever's pulled off.

"I don't believe that money was ever cached in Owl Canyon. If it was it wasn't left there long. I've a notion this saying that Ober was over to Carocas

is a blind. I don't know much about ranching or ranch country. Foster don't agree with all my notions. He's got a right to his seeing he rounded up Ober before when the sheriff missed him.

"I'm handling this along my own lines. There's four of us handling it, you from the penitentiary, Foster, Perley, and myself. It's natural we mightn't agree. The main thing is we're after Ober. So long's we don't interfere with each other, four plays should be better than one This is one way I reason.

"Say the money *is* cached in Owl Canyon. I don't know where that rumor started. Maybe locally—another mislead. But say it is. Ober won't ride up there with a brass band. If he sees it's guarded, or if he runs into a fuss there, his jig is up so far as his private little vengeance on Foster is concerned. He'll have to fight, running or standing.

"You can take your choice as to whether he prefers the money or to get after Foster. I say Foster, unless he's got that money tucked away some other place, he figures he can get at it without being waited for.

"It's another notion of mine that soon as he knew Foster had the speed of him that time, he dug in that loot near where he was overhauled. Those are my notions, gentlemen, and you can take what you think is good in them."

"How long have you been on the ground?"

"I got here about four hours after they escaped."

The other looked incredulous. The men with him smiled. Lyman turned toward Higgins. Only Foster seemed unimpressed.

"From headquarters?"

Higgins nodded. "New methods. Wireless for the news and aeroplane for me. First time I rode in one. The wind scorched. Left in a hurry. Ought to have greased my face, I reckon. Night skinned me. We lit in the desert four miles out of Fenton, and I walked in. No one seems to have figured me

a flier. If they saw the machine they'd think it a cross-country flight or the special mail."

"Wall, I'll be dehorned," muttered Lyman. "An aeryplane!"

"You're going with Foster?" asked the warden's man.

"I'm staying at the ranch. I'm not much of a horseman."

"Figure Ober's coming to call at the ranch-house?"

There was a trace of jealousy in this speech from the head of the posse, the hint of a sneer. Higgins's face did not change. His eyes were shining and steady.

"I figure to get my man," he said quietly. "That's the motto of the B.P.A. To get our man. And the money."

In the discussion that followed it was obvious that the notions of Higgins—or John Boyd—were not in full favor. The plans of Foster and of the posse remained practically unchanged. The talk broke up an hour after midnight.

CHAPTER IX

THE next day the ranch was practically deserted Men were out in the hills watching for the outlaws protecting the cattle. But the line was pitifully thin. They could not help but leave gaps. The herds were well guarded, however. The men who had been on night duty slept in the bunkhouse. Foster remained away, with Slim, who was keen to show himself well in Mary's eyes. They snatched an hour or two in the sage. Higgins fussed with the chickens. Mary Foster, nervous but plucky, busied herself with Wong in preparing accommodation for visitors. She had the warden's posse to provide for, and it was probable that Perley and his men would eventually rendezvous at the Ess-Eff headquarters. There were all sorts of possibilities, and she felt them in the air keeping her in tension.

Higgins's placidity as she glanced at him from time to time, reduced him again in her estimation.

At four o'clock Slim came riding furiously in, his horse staggering, its flank dark with blood. The girl ran out to him. He limped as he dismounted. He was caked with sweat and dust, and asked for water, drinking feverishly while Mary waited impatiently for his news.

"I was over to the Aroyo Seco," he said. "Two miles this side of Cabesas Pass. Someone took a shot at me from the top of the cliff. Hawss saved me. He sabe'd something that startled him an' he must have jumped just as they pulled trigger. They got him in the flank and he bolted. They got me with a

runnin' shot in the calf. They're atop the cliffs. Tried to put me out of the way case I suspicioned something. They must have come clear over the mesa aimin' to sneak down after dark."

"Are you hurt badly? Let me look at it, Slim."

"It ain't nothing." Slim was almost inarticulate from rage. "I've got the bleedin' stopped. They've ruined the hawss, I reckon. Where's your father?"

"I haven't seen him, Slim."

"He said he aimed to git back here before dark. I have to git another hawss anyway an' round him up. They may not have heard the firin'. It's been thunderin' in the hills all day. You look out for this hawss, will you, Mary? I'll turn out the sleepers. We'll round 'em up. Cut through Cabesas an' round the mesa 'fore they can cross it. They can't make time. It's all broken up on top. Now they've missed me they'll make a break."

"Let one of the boys go, Slim. You'll start bleeding again."

"Think I'm goin' to miss this fo' a scratch? I'm goin' to git the coyote who potted me an' ruined my hawss. You telephone into Saugus. Git the *Herald* office. They'll send word to Perley. One of the sleepers can go over to Gunshot Canyon an' round up the warden's crowd. That chap Higgins can help you with the hawss if you tell him what to do. I'm off."

He went rapidly for all his limp. The girl watched him with more admiration than concern. He had proved himself. He showed he could use his head.

She went after Higgins, finding him in the granary, where he had not seen the arrival of Slim.

"Good for him," he said tersely, and the girl saw his eyes light up. "I'll attend to the horse. I can't ride 'em, but I can mend 'em. You get to the phone."

She ran to the office shack, excited, in the whirl of

action, but clearheaded. As she went in, the riders were racing from the bunkhouse for their mounts.

The line was dead. There was always some buzzing, some sign of life on the busy party phone, but now, jiggle the hook as she might, there was no response. She tried and tried, angrily, despairingly, until Higgins came in at the door.

"They're off," he said. "Horse is fixed. He'll do. I know something about gunshot wounds. Can't you get a connection?"

She surrendered the wire. He listened for a minute or two.

"It's cut," he said with decision.

"I'll go in the car," she said.

"You're to stay on the ranch," he answered her authoritatively. His voice was imperative, his manner changed. His eyes again caught hers, and held them. They seemed strangely metallic, steely. "Your father's orders," he said.

"But it's an emergency."

"Not the kind you think. I want you to stay."

"You want me?"

"Yes. I'm a detective, Miss Foster." He went on without more explanation, unheeding her gasp of surprise, his will compelling hers. "It don't matter about the phone. Tell me what Slim told you. I only got bits of it while I was fixing the horse. What's this Arroyo Seco?"

"A dry ravine."

"Leads to the mesa. Trail?"

"Yes. An old Indian trail. Just enough for a hard climb up and down. The mesa's broken on top. Deep cracks. If they are up there they'll be surrounded."

She answered him with staccato precision, unhesitatingly. The new Higgins demanded and commanded obedience.

"Good. Funny they let Slim get away."

"His horse bolted."

"Funny they shot so soon. Damn funny!" He did not apologize for the word, but took a black and gold banded cigar from Foster's box and began to smoke it, sitting on the edge of the desk.

"That bullet in the horse was a thirty-thirty," he said. The girl thought he spoke more to himself than to her though he spoke aloud. He seemed to be revolving a problem, puffing furiously.

"You said it would get well?"

"Yep. Slim's all right, too. I strapped him up. Fine, capable chap. You want to look at the horse? Your father won't be back now for a while."

It was nearing sunset when they came out of the barn. The world seemed absolutely quiet except for the clucking of the Hen Herder's charges.

"Got to feed them and then shut them up," he said. "Got a pair of field glasses in the house?"

"Yes." The girl fetched them mechanically, her mind on the chase she visioned in the ravines and over the mesa.

Higgins swept the dulling landscape with the glasses. There was no sign of dust, there was no sound of distant firing.

"Suppose we have supper," he suggested. "I'll ask you to invite me."

There seemed to be no incongruity about the proposal now. There was no longer a question of appearance about Higgins. She wondered a little why he had elected to stay at the ranch, why he wanted her to stay instead of taking the car, but he held her confidence.

"That chicken-man eat along of you?" Wong demanded.

"Yes, Wong. He isn't a chicken-man. He's a detective."

"Hi-loh! Detective? I *sabe* all along he heap smaht. Can do."

The meal was silent. The girl could think of nothing but what might be happening on the mesa, with her father, with Slim. Once Higgins asked if a bottle in the old-fashioned cruet held red pepper.

"Good for chickens," he said. "I meant to get some when I was in town. Got any you can spare?"

Wong produced an original package. Higgins asked for a saucer and poured out half the contents.

"Why don't you take it all?" she asked.

"Rather have it this way."

Supper over, she brought him a cigar from her father's room, laying the box beside him with matches.

"We're rather out of it," she said. "It's hard work, waiting."

"Sure is. But we'll be hearing before long." It seemed to the girl that he sat there with senses strained, listening and watching. He looked like a hound denied the chase.

"Shall we go outside?" she asked. "On the porch?"

"No." He leaned forward, drawing her gaze. The girl fancied she could see an actual light shining through his gray eyes as if they had been lenses.

"I'm going to talk to you like I would to a man, Miss Mary," he went on. "I've had a bit of a slip-up, but it can't be helped. I figured on the boys who were asleep staying round the ranch, but Slim's affair stampeded 'em. They wouldn't listen to me, naturally." He played with the saucer of red pepper, turning it about for a minute before he went on.

"You know about Ober?"

"I think so."

"Know he swore he'd get even with your father?"

"I'm not afraid for dad."

"You needn't be. Ober's more likely afraid of him. He didn't aim for any personal scrap. Your father believes he means to hurt the herd, or run it off. I don't.

"I know a good deal about Ober and his kind. It's my business. And I know Ober's record. Now, our people have been investigating the idea of local men in the bank hold-up with Ober. We got a lead that they were hidden out. That one of them hid the chap who was wounded. Where? We decided on one of the Mexican villages. It boiled down to that, in a way. We covered the rest of the ground pretty thoroughly, but a wounded man could hide up among those Mexicans if they were friendly, get healed, and come back with a good alibi.

"I went over to Carocas the other night in your car and found out a few things. That's where Thayer and Pedro went that night."

"Thayer?"

"Yep. Thayer ain't been long with you people. He brought Pedro with him. I've figured Thayer for some time. I picked that fight with Thayer. Egged him on though he didn't know it. I wanted a chance to see if he had a bullet scar on his left shoulder. He never gave the boys a chance to see it, I know that."

"Oh!" The girl leaned forward, high color in her cheeks. "And father never suspected. He didn't like him much, but he was a good man. And I instinctively disliked him."

"Yes, miss. A woman's instinct is pretty sure. As for your father, he had his own theories, and mine may be wrong. I didn't interfere with his handling of the business. He got Ober once. But the bullet mark was there. You can't convict a man on that. When he's got a good alibi. And Thayer would have that. Besides, it wasn't ripe to start anything. I wanted to give him rope and let him lead somewhere. Things have worked nicely but for Slim's getting shot.

"I don't like that shooting. Slim was just rounding up cattle. He wasn't looking for them. Probably wouldn't have gone to the top of the mesa, anyway.

They risked the shooting being heard, for all the thunder. Your riders would have known the difference. Look at it. Here they are all ready to slip down at nightfall and they pull a fool trick like that. And Ober ain't a fool. He wouldn't spoil what he was after—the main thing—with a bum long-range shot.

"Now, suppose they wanted to stampede the whole bunch that was after them, wardens, this outfit, and Perleys; if they wanted to make them spend all the time till dark, and after, trying to round them up on top a cut-up mesa with a hundred hideouts, to waste time riding round, why they did a fine thing. Pulled a prime trick."

"Why?"

"The man who fired that shot, to my mind, wasn't with Ober. He was a good shot and he never meant to kill. He was one of Ober's gang, but he was a man who could show up later without suspicion. I figure it was Thayer. I told your father I suspected him, and he put him and Pedro along with Lyman and another chap, but they might have given Lyman the slip." Higgins had another guess concerning what might have happened to Lyman and the rider, but he did not word it.

"Thayer brought his own rifle along. It was a thirty-thirty. It's the only rifle of that caliber on the ranch. Same caliber bullet as I dug out of the horse.

"Then there's that sheepherder who said he saw Ober over Carocas way. He was a Mexican. I know he was in Carocas Springs that night with Thayer. And Ober was travelling nights, not day times."

He raised his hands to check the girl's speech.

"Now." He shifted the saucer again. "That sheepherder may have seen Ober, but not where and when he said he did. He might have been a go-between."

"I see."

"Not quite all, yet, miss. I've watched you. Your father has told me about the stock you came from. Your mother and grandmother. I'm depending on you. It's not Indians we're bucking, but bad white men. Steady now, I'm coming to it. That's right.

"I know Ober. Your father thinks he might try to hurt the herd, fire the ranch, maybe take a pot shot at him. He might, to round out his programme. But I know Ober. He knows you're on the ranch. He'd rather get you than anything."

The girl paled, one lip caught up in her teeth, but her eyes were brave. Higgins watched her narrowly and approvingly.

"You'll do. If Ober got you he could hold you for ransom. Your father's worth a good deal more than thirty thousand. He'd give every cent he owned before he'd leave you twenty-four hours with Ober."

"You think they are coming here? That they have tricked the others out of the way?"

"Looks like it to me. I hope I'm wrong. Your father knows my theory, and he don't think much of it. He got you to promise to stick round the ranch, he'd arranged to guard it to-night himself, and he didn't see how you could be kidnapped. He figured I was a good enough man in the city, but out of my line on the range. But Ober works the same way in town or country. Your dad'll be sending someone back soon if he don't come himself. So——"

There was a crash of crockery from the kitchen, Wong's high, protesting voice topped by a rougher one. Higgins started up, facing the kitchen door. Back of him the front door from the porch was burst open and two men jumped inside the room with leveled guns. The leader barked out a gruff "Hands up, you chicken-chaser! Stay as you are, miss!"

Higgins's right hand, rising toward his breast, went up with a jerk. His left hand followed it. His face showed incredulity, and then became that of a cowed man.

A flash of contempt for him swept through Mary Foster.

CHAPTER X

THE first man through the front door, with his round head covered with close-cropped reddish hair, with reddish whiskers making his bull jaws savage, with his pale blue eyes that examined her in a vicious enjoyment that made her burn with shame at the subjection; without doubt this was Ober, and the leering creature backing him one of his men.

"Just in time for supper, miss," said Ober. "But we ain't hungry for that. We'd have bin here sooner on'y, if we started cross country after dark, they could have seen us from the top of the mesa—where they're coon huntin' for us. Now we're here we'll not waste time. Cut it short, Thayer! The boys are busy outside. Don't want to rouse the whole country."

Thayer had come in through the kitchen door. Back of him was Pedro.

The buster walked over to where Higgins stood with his arms exalted, and slapped him in the face with his left hand. Then he ran his hands about Higgins's belt back to his hips.

"He don't carry guns. Only grain for the hens," he said. "Well, Ober, she's as pretty as I said she was, ain't she? If the Old Man don't come through as high as you want, I'll buy her off you. Used to think I was dirt, she did."

"Cut that stuff out," commanded Ober. "You 'tend to yore own end of this. You said you wanted to handle this chicken feeder. What are you goin' to do with him? Hurry up, whatever it is."

"I've a good mind to let Pedro cut his heart out.

Stretch yore neck, you. I can't git at you the way yore arms are. Put 'em back, shove out yore face."

Higgins thrust his arms back obediently, forced to crook them a little at the elbow as he did so. He thrust his face forward. The girl's eyes blazed with scorn.

Thayer, his battered face that of a devil, shifted his gun from his right hand to his left for the buffet. Like a fool who is too sure of himself he did it deliberately, to taunt the man he was going to smash in reprisal. Before the weapon passed, something flashed from beneath the left lapel of Higgins's coat, a flat automatic leaping from an armpit holster under the urge of fingers that moved as surely and swiftly as those of a conjurer. There was a flash, a report, and Thayer, a hole under his left collarbone, staggered by the impact of the unexpected bullet and the nerve shock, that also sent his gun clattering to the floor, spun on his feet.

Higgins kicked the gun along the floor beneath a heavy sideboard. He swung the falling Thayer before him as a shield, shouting to the girl.

"Get behind the piano!" as there came the spit and roar of guns.

Ober and his man jumped apart, firing at angles. The man leaped as if to grasp the girl, to use her as Higgins used Thayer, but she eluded him, leaping back of the piano as Higgins had ordered, crouching behind the barricade, staring, panting, dreading the issue.

Blood spurted and streamed from Higgins's head, but he was still erect. The whole thing passed with the mad rush of a nightmare. The Hen Herder jumped aside, as Thayer slid to the floor, and a chair was tossed through space, hurled straight at Ober's man. Then Ober went lurching backward, a look of intense surprise in his face, back to the corner of the walls where he braced himself, but slid down until he was sitting there on the floor, his head hung forward.

The man balked by the chair was hit somewhere. Reeling, he caught at the table cloth and dragged it clear dishes falling about him. Even as the linen slipped, Higgins retrieved the little dish of pepper at the instant that Pedro's knife—he had no gun—went streaking across space and thudded home over Higgins's heart.

He seemed to topple, a horrible sight, with blood all over the side of his head, soaking his coat, hiding the new gash that the knife must make. Then he jumped forward and flung the pepper fair in Pedro's face. The half-breed howled in anguish, sneezing convulsively.

"Knife hit my holster," panted Higgins. "He forgot it was there—and I was moving. See about Wong, will you? No, wait a minute, I'll do that. You get upstairs and see what you can see outside. Don't turn on a light."

He was reloading as he spoke.

"Where are you hit?" she asked.

"Right through the top of the ear. Up you go, miss, please. We're not through this."

She pointed to the windows, where a glare was showing. "The barns are on fire!"

"It's hell!" he said. "Just plain hell, miss, but we can't help it right now. We've got to look out for ourselves first. The fire'll bring a raft of folks a-kiting, including your dad and the rest of 'em. They know that outside. They may have cut and run. They had their instructions from Ober. And Ober'll never give any more. I wish you'd take a look."

She ran upstairs obediently. A glance and she was down again. Higgins had trussed up the weeping, cursing, praying Pedro.

"They are coming!" she cried. "Some of our own men. They're close up."

"Thank God for that!" said Higgins. "You're quite sure?"

"Certain."

"Then you had better keep an eye on these chaps. Take a gun Plug 'em if they start anything. I—don't—think—they—will."

His voice trailed off and he keeled over.

When her father rushed in, he found her crying over Higgins.

"They've shot him all to pieces," she sobbed. "They've killed him."

"They should have, with the odds," he told her. "But I guess they haven't this time Arm an' thigh an' one in the shoulder, to say nothin' of the ear. But I'm bettin' he'll pull out. We'll git him in his bunk."

"You'll take him upstairs," she said. "In my room. I'll take the little guest room."

Her father went out. It was midnight before he came in, after the fire was out without loss to stock and after the wardens and Perley had taken off their prisoners to Saugus. Mary Foster, in a dressing gown, was awake reading in the little guest room. He looked in to say good-night.

"Higgins is sure a wonder," he added. "Wong can watch him. He's not a bad nurse."

"I'll sit up," she said.

"As you like. We'll have the doctor and a regular nurse here before morning. Perley's lookin' out for that."

"Higgins is sure a wonder," he added. "He had the whole thing doped out right. Pedro came through with a confession. That pepper gave him a foretaste of the hereafter, I reckon. Higgins was right about the money, too. And they called him a Hen Herder. He's a wonder. Lyman says he knew it right erlong. Just like Hen'."

"He's a hero!"

Again her father looked at her quizzically.

"Slim feels a heap better," he said.

"I didn't know he was badly hurt. I'll see him in the morning."

"I reckon it warn't his wound so much as his feelings. He cheered up wonderful when I told him about the wire I sent by Perley."

"What wire, dad?"

"To Denver. To Mrs. Homer Higgins, Mrs. John Boyd. Just to tell her husband was all right, case she learned different. Good-night, honey. Better get some sleep."

"Thank you, dad. Good-night." Her voice seemed a little strained. "I guess I'll take your advice."

Outside her door Foster chuckled.

"I reckon I lied in a good cause when I told Slim Mary knew about Ma Higgins an' the little Higginses," he said to himself. "Anyway, I'm bettin' she never lets on she didn't."

SMASHING UP SPERG THE SPY

By RICHARD STANDISH

SMASHING UP SPERG THE SPY

I

THE STOLEN TRACINGS

"THANK the fates we're taking a trip, Nobby. I'm fed to the giddy teeth with this city."

In Sir Henry Stone's private sitting-room at the British Embassy in Berlin Dicky Stone, his nephew, sat with crossed legs on a large table in the centre and grinned across at his pal, Nobby Knight.

Nobby Knight was staring out of the window, his hands behind his back, immaculately dressed as usual and the "window" in his eye.

"Sure thing, old bean," he retorted in his aristocratic way—and Nobby had "Honourable" before his name and thought he ought to live up to it in his language—"but your common or garden corruption of English speech is apt to be——"

"Bosh!" Dick grunted, disgustedly. "For goodness sake drop your aristocratic tones for once, Nobby, old sport. Don't you realise uncle's taking us to Vienna?"

Nobby nodded calmly. His father, Lord Kinnerstone, was in charge of the Embassy, and both he and Dicky, his school-mate, had come to Berlin to stay with their relatives for the winter holidays.

"Of course, old fellow," he grinned, "it's jolly decent of your uncle to take us there. But——"

There was a slight sound at the door. Dick frowned

and moved towards it cautiously. He knew enough of the ways of spies to be up to the emergency. And there were reasons why anyone might be listening at the door.

He grinned across at Nobby, who watched in silence. On tip-toe Dick reached the door, grasped the knob and with startling suddenness flung it wide open.

"*Donner und blitzen—ach!*"

Thud!

A slight figure of a man, elegantly dressed, fell through on to the carpet and bit the floor with a bang. Dick uttered a cry of amazement and started back, while Nobby's handsome features spread into a smile.

"Bai jove," he laughed; "what a beastly original way of coming into a room!"

The elegant little man was detaching himself from the floor. He rose rather stiffly and glared angrily at Dick.

"Ach, you—you——"

Then with a quick change of countenance he smiled. Dick recognised him instantly as Von Sperg, the German sportsman and wealthy friend of diplomats. Sperg had made an impression on Dick's uncle, Sir Henry Stone, while Dick heartily hated the little German.

Sperg's features broke into a smile that made him appear more sinister than ever. His eyes narrowed like a fox's and his thin, harsh lips parted.

"Ach, so it is Mister Dick, it is? But this is a pleashare, mine friendt!"

Dick grunted as he closed the door.

"Rather careless about leaning against doors, weren't you, Mr. Sperg?" he asked sharply. "Come to see my uncle?"

Sperg nodded profusely.

"Ach, but it is so. I haf come to see my friendt, Sir Henry. He is in?"

Dick nodded.

"In his office next door. I'll tell him you've come."

He crossed to an inner door and passed out of sight. Nobby watched the German closely and Sperg smiled in a sickly way at the aristocratic youngster.

"It is a fine day, mine friendt? You young shentelmen air going out to enjoy the sun?"

Nobby grinned.

"I've had sufficient enjoyment, Mr. Sperg, seeing you turn a somersault on the carpet, thank you."

For a second Sperg frowned, but the inimitable, sickly smile returned almost at once. It paid Sperg to be pleasant.

"Ach, you joke at my expenze. It is hard on your poor old friendt and——"

The inner door opened and Dick appeared, his uncle coming out behind him. Sir Henry was a tall, well-dressed, clean-shaven man of fifty-five. His bronzed features were hard, but his eyes seemed always to be twinkling with merriment. He advanced to Sperg and held out his hand.

"Ah, come in, Von Sperg. I'm afraid I shall have to postpone that lunch. I have to get to Vienna at once, but I can spare you ten minutes. Come in, will you?"

He pointed through the doorway to the office beyond. Von Sperg smiled, bowed and passed through while Sir Henry motioned Dick.

"Put this blue envelope into that leather travelling case," he said softly. "Here is the key. Lock the case and keep the key in your pocket, I——"

He turned hastily and followed the German into the adjoining room, closing it after him.

Dick grunted as he took the envelope to the leather case and began to open it with the key.

"Dirty little spy," he muttered. "I'd like to push Von Sperg's nose into his face!"

Nobby grinned.

"Carried magnanimously, old fellow," he approved.

"But you are a little hasty, Dick. Von Sperg, the friend of diplomats, the wealthy patron of sport, has nothing proved against him."

Dick's eyes blazed. He looked up indignantly.

"Eh? Didn't you and me see him hob-nobbing about in the back places of this town the other night with Carlsbad, the notorious Russian adventurer? And isn't rumour persistent in putting him down as an adventurer and a spy?"

Nobby shrugged his shoulders and moved to the door.

"I'll go and see how my father is faring. I'll have to say cheerio to the old pater, for your uncle will be ready to start in a few minutes."

He went out slowly, and Dick thrust the blue envelope into the leather case, snapped the lock to, and was just turning the key when——

Thud! Crash! Bang!

He wheeled to the outer door with a gasp.

"What in the dickens——!"

He dashed to the door and swung out into the corridor, racing to the corner a couple of yards away and then, as he gazed down the corridor turning out of it, he burst into laughter and nearly doubled up.

"Great guns and ginger-pops," he roared, "what on earth are you doing on the floor, Nobby, old beak?"

A couple of yards ahead the elegant Nobby was picking himself up in instalments from the floor. His well-brushed hair was standing up on end, his eyeglass was wedged into his collar, his coat was hunched over his shoulder and all around him the floor was dotted with little pieces of a small statuette which had been standing on a pedestal against the wall.

Nobby glared at his chum as he got up stiffly, caressing his thighs painfully.

"Thank you," he said icily. "I was—er—just going along to my father's room."

Dick burst into laughter again.

"You made a bit of a hash of the going along, son. What—what in the deuce are you doing to that statuette?"

Nobby examined the empty pedestal gloomily.

"I—er—I don't remember it hitting me. I think I'll turn back, after all."

Dick grinned.

"I should if I were you. Come on and stop where your uncle can look after you."

Nobby followed him stiffly back to the sitting-room and Dick went over to the case and locked it.

"That's safe enough," he muttered, trying the lock and thrusting the key into his pocket. "How did you come to slip like that, Nobby?"

His pal grinned, seeing the humour of it now.

"The bally floor is like glass," he remarked. "How long is your uncle going to be, Dick?"

His pal shrugged his shoulders, but five minutes later the inner door opened and Sir Henry came out and ushered Von Sperg into the passage.

"Goot-bye, mine friendt," the German beamed, shaking hands heartily. "I shall meet you in Vienna in a few days, maybe. Pleasant shourney, mine friendt. Goot-bye!"

He walked off down the passage and as his uncle turned back into the room, Dick uttered a cry of annoyance.

"Look here, uncle, why don't you tick that little rotter off! I told you we saw him going about with Carlsbad, the notorious adventurer. Von Sperg's rumoured to have a rotten reputation, too, and how you like him is beyond me."

Sir Henry smiled pleasantly.

"You're wrong, Dick—impulsive and young. Sperg is a keen sportsman, and I like him as a friend. Er—did you lock that envelope in the case?"

Dick nodded, handing his uncle the key.

"Good," Sir Henry sighed. "The tracings of a new plan of fortifications were in there. That is why I am going to Vienna. They must be in the hands of our Ambassador there at the earliest moment, or it will mean serious things to Britain."

He unlocked the case, to put in some other papers and took up the blue envelope.

"Some nations would give a lot to have those tracings," he smiled. "Russia, for one. But they will be in this case, and this case won't leave my hands until we reach Vienna and then I'll breathe with relief again. But get your things on, you boys. We start at once. The train goes in an hour and—great Scots! I——"

He started back, staring at one end of the envelope. Dick took a step forward, gasping in astonishment.

"What's the matter, uncle? You——"

Sir Henry turned suddenly pale. He wheeled round and faced his nephew.

"Did you—did you go out of the room at all, while this envelope was in this case?"

Dick looked amazed.

"Why, only a second. Nobby fell down outside and I ran out to see what was the matter, but——"

"The tracings," Sir Henry cried hoarsely. "They—they've been stolen. Someone must have come in while you were out. The key—was it in the lock?"

Dick nodded, turning pale.

"Yes, but—they'd have had to pass me in the corridor. I—uncle, did you leave Von Sperg alone in the office?"

Sir Henry gasped.

"I did for a moment. My secretary called me away and—but no, you are wrong. It couldn't have been Von Sperg, it——"

He seemed dazed and bewildered. Dick looked ashamed and desperate.

"We'll look round, uncle. Sure you put 'em in

that envelope? I—I'm jolly sorry, but you didn't tell me——"

Sir Henry shook his head.

"Anyone might have run out for a second as you did, but——" and suddenly his calm left him. "We've got to find those tracings," he cried. "My honour is at stake. I shall be discredited, ruined if they are not recovered, and at once. They mean everything to Great Britain. I had care of them and——"

Dick glanced quickly at his pal.

"I'm sorry, uncle," he repeated. "It was a rottenly careless thing to do but——"

"You acted quite naturally," Sir Henry cried. "Great Scott, what can I do! Quick, run down and tell the door-keeper not to let anyone go out until we've had a search. I——"

But Dick's features grew almost crimson, his eyes flashed. Angered with himself for his natural thoughtlessness, he faced his uncle.

"Search nothing, uncle," he cried. "It was Von Sperg. It couldn't have been anyone else. He's a rotten little sneak and I—it was my fault and I'm jolly-well going to search him and make him give those tracings up! Come on, Nobby!"

He darted for the door, and Nobby sprang to his heels.

"That's the stuff," he cried, forgetting his aristocratic obligations in his excitement. "We'll push his ugly nose into his face and——"

"Dick! Come back!" Sir Henry cried desperately, striding to the door. "You're wrong. You're making a mistake. Come back!"

But he reached the corridor too late. Dick and Nobby had gone—after Von Sperg.

II

TOO LATE

Outside the Embassy Dick looked desperately round for a taxi.

"We'll get to his flat before him," he cried. "I know where it is. Come on, here's a cab!"

He hailed a taxi, and as the driver drew up he shouted the German's address.

The lads sprang in as the cab drew away and threw themselves back among the cushions.

"Gosh!" Dick gasped angrily, "to think I left those tracings in that bag even for a second. But I didn't know what they were. I could kick myself for——"

Thud!

Nobby thrust out his foot and Dick roared as he felt a sharp touch on his shins.

"Hi, what the deuce——"

"Kicking your shins," Nobby grinned. "Teaching you to use respectable language. But listen, how d'you know Von Sperg's gone to his flat? I believe, with you, the little rotter's a spy, but if he's got those tracings he'd——"

"Can't be helped," Dick cried. "We must try there first. Here we are, outside the block of flats already."

Dick knew the flat. Only a few days since he had gone there with his uncle to dine with the sleek little German. He set his lips as they darted up the stone steps to the first floor.

By his own carelessness, natural as it was, he had caused his uncle to be threatened with ruin, and it might mean terrible consequences to Great Britain —the country he loved—if the tracings weren't recovered.

"I'll get 'em," he cried as they reached the door of Sperg's apartments, "if I have to throttle him! Come on, Nobby, ring that bell!"

A moment and the tall figure of a Jerry butler appeared at the door. Dick faced him angrily.

"Where—where's your employer?" he asked in German. "Has he come back yet?"

The butler frowned and shook his head.

"Nein," he replied. "My employer will nod be back." He attempted a clumsy English in reply. "He vill nod be back for a long time, shentelmen."

His eyes narrowed. He recognised Dick and seemed to be smiling inwardly.

Dick turned to Nobby.

"Is he speaking the truth?"

Nobby shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't trust him far. Let's have a look."

"Right!"

Dick barged into the astonished butler and swept into the luxuriously-appointed flat. He searched every room and came out into the little hall at length to glare at the offended servant.

"Where's Von Sperg gone, eh? You know?"

The butler smiled suavely.

"I am his servant. I do nod know, young shentleman."

Dick uttered a cry of dismay. He felt he could throw himself at the fellow, for he was certain he knew. But a sudden thought flashed through his mind.

"All right," he snapped. "Come on, Nobby. We'll jolly well find out."

He strode outside and down to the street where their cab was waiting.

"Drive to the Frederick Station," he cried to the taxi man. "Come on, Nobby, in you go."

Nobby climbed in after his pal and faced him in a puzzled sort of way.

"What's the bally idea, Dick?" he asked.

Dick grinned.

"Didn't you hear uncle say that if Russia got hold of these tracings it would be worth their while?"

"Yes, but——"

"Well, and didn't we see Von Sperg with Carlsbad, the rotten Russian adventurer?"

"Surely, my son, you——"

"We're going to the station. Von Sperg's off to Russia with those tracings, I'll bet. We'll catch him at the station and make him cough them up."

Nobby shrugged his shoulders.

"I absolutely reject any responsibility," he grinned. "You seem pretty sure, but—I guess you may be right," he ended.

"You bet your patent blinkin' boots I am," Dick cried, his eyes gleaming. "Where else would he go? Haven't I put two and two together?"

But he wasn't sure, in his own mind. He was only trying the most likely place.

When they reached the great building which was the Frederick Station, he sprang out and dashed into the booking-hall, staring round him anxiously.

There was no sign of Von Sperg.

"Try the platform," Nobby suggested, but Dick ignored the remark and darted to the first-class booking-slot.

"Has a gentleman booked to Petrograd from here, during the last fifteen minutes?" he asked abruptly. "A small chap. I want to see him urgently. Short—rather pale complexion—a big nose a bit crooked and——"

The young clerk behind the counter grinned.

"By your description," he replied in German, "I

think I know the gentleman." He evidently took them for the little German's relatives or something. Boys of their age couldn't be detectives. "Yes," he went on. "The train he will catch leaves the platform—number two—in—ach, you will have to hurry. It has perhaps even left already."

"Right-o, old sport," Dick cried triumphantly. He wheeled to face Nobby.

"Platform Two, like the dickens!"

They darted out into the main part of the station and rushed to Platform Two, pulling up before the barrier. Dick uttered a cry of dismay and beckoned an official grimly.

"Train just left?" he enquired.

The official nodded, eyeing them keenly.

"Yes, a moment ago. You're too late, if you wanted to catch it."

"Was it a train for Petrograd?" Dick asked desperately, hoping the clerk had given them the wrong platform.

"Yes, a through carriage for Petrograd," the official answered.

Dick grunted as he turned to his pal.

"Dished, dilled, and done!" he cried. "Now, what in the deuce are we to do?"

Nobby, as cheerful as ever in the face of any emergency, shrugged his shoulders and fixed his eyeglass in his eye.

"Hanged if I know, Dick, old son! Think we could—er—run after it?"

Dick grunted.

"Bust your blinkin' humour. Von Sperg's got those tracings. I'm surer now than ever. We've got to get 'em back. Think I'm going to let poor old uncle be ruined by my carelessness! Come on; it means everything to uncle and—and our country. Take out that blessed pane of glass from your eye and get busy!"

Nobby seemed puzzled.

"Where to, old chap?"

"The aerodrome, just outside the town," Dick snapped. "We can't run after the blessed train, but we—we'll fly."

Nobby gasped.

"Hold on a second, the bally air makes me sick and——"

But Dick had grasped Nobby's collar and was lugging him towards the entrance.

Back to the cab-rank they ran, and hailed one of the drivers, jumping into his vehicle and instructing him to drive to the aerodrome.

It was a long ride, and Dick was impatient.

"If I don't get those tracings I'll feel as sick as mutton," he gasped. "Just fancy, I only left the bally key in the lock a second. Nobby, if you ever fall down again——"

Nobby grunted as he straightened his tie.

"You're far too energetic, Dick," he grumbled. "Fancy chasing a beastly train in an aeroplane! How in the dickens are we goin' to get aboard her?"

Dick grinned.

"You'll see."

When they reached the big aerodrome, on the hill to the east of Berlin, the great German capital, Dick directed his man to pull up at the entrance.

They sprang out and Dick muttered a few words to the man on duty at the gates.

"We want a 'plane and want it quickly. Where do we go?"

"A 'plane? Where for? The London flyer has just left and——"

But Dick, catching sight of a tall figure in airman's clothes by a huge hangar near by, strode forward.

"Hi, just a second, old son!"

The airman had his back to him, but he turned now and with a gasp of amazement Dick ran forward.

"Well, I'm dashed, if it isn't old Buster Stonway!"

The handsome young Englishman turned. Nobby grinned, too, as they recognised the fellow who had once been captain of their school.

"Gee whiz!" Dick cried, "what brings you here, Stonway?"

The young airman grinned.

"I'm on my way to Vienna," he smiled. "Taking important documents for a lawyer in London. But I just popped down here for supplies. What's the hurry? What are you youngsters doing in Berlin?"

Dick ignored the question.

"Say, Stonway, have you got your 'plane ready?"

"Yes, young 'un, but——"

Dick told his old school prefect his story as briefly as possible, and Stonway's eyes gleamed.

"Come on," he cried, "I'll take you, you young beggar."

They ran to a big machine standing behind the hangar and Stonway went for togs while they waited.

"Gee, what luck!" Dick grinned. "Nobby, we'll have those tracings back in no time now!"

Nobby groaned.

"The bally air—I'm goin' to be sick. I know it—I know it!"

"Bosh!" Dick cut in. "Don't think about it. We'll always be able to throw you out if the air's too strong. Ah. here are our togs!"

Stonway ran up with air togs for the lads and hastily they put them on.

"Right away," Dick cried as he sprung in beside Nobby, and Stonway climbed to the controls. "Fast as you like—the Petrograd train, Stonway. You know its route?"

Stonway nodded, and with a whirr he set the engine going. The big 'plane made a graceful tour across the landing ground and rose into the air like a bird.

"Ouch!" Nobby groaned, pressing his hands to his

stomach. "I'm bally sure I shall be sick. I always am, dash it! I'll——"

Dick prodded him in the ribs.

"Shurrup! You can't be sick here, you ass."

Nobby glared angrily.

"Can't? You jolly well see if I can't, if this airy feeling in my stomach carries on much beastly longer."

A shout from Stonway.

"We're passing over the Embassy!" he roared, and Dick looked down.

He thought of his uncle—one of the very best. Sir Henry would be torn with anxiety. The loss of the tracings meant his ruin, and, to Great Britain, goodness knew what consequences. "But they're not going to be lost," he muttered. "It was my fault. I'll jolly well get 'em back."

They passed eastward over the big town, and presently were roaring away over barren stretches of country. Here and there cornfields were dotted and, as they neared Dresden, huge belts of trees became evident—young trees being grown for timber.

And then, past Dresden, the country once again. And after half-an-hour they caught sight of a little trail of white smoke in the far distance. Dick turned his head.

"There she is, Stonway! That's the jolly old train. I'll get the rope ladder ready!"

Nobby gasped as Dick grinned at him.

"You—you're goin' down a beastly rope ladder with this bally 'plane swinging about like she is and racing like a jolly old 'bus with a dotty driver?"

"Sure thing," Dick retorted, unfolding the rope ladder fixed to the side as he spoke, "and you're coming too, Nobby, old aristocrat!"

Nobby groaned.

"Great Scott! Ah, well, it's your funeral."

"Maybe yours too," Dick warned. "It's a risky

job, climbing on to the roof of a moving train from a rope ladder."

Nobby sighed.

"Well, I'm sure I'll be sick if I stay up here much longer. Look, we're nearly up to her, Dick."

They peered down and saw that they were descending slowly and overtaking the train at a tremendous speed.

"How fast's she travelling?" Dick cried, turning to Stonway.

The airman shrugged his shoulders.

"Sixty or so," he roared. "Out you get, and mind your necks."

Nobby kissed his hand to the airman.

"See you in the hereafter," he grinned.

Thud!

Dick loosed the ladder and swung her free. Now they had reached the back of the train, and Stonway kept the 'plane steadily above.

Dick swung over the side, gripping the ladder, and commenced that dizzy climb down.

He reached the bottom wooden rung and paused. They were gaining slightly on the fast-moving train. He drew in his breath and sprang.

Thud!

He reached the roof and clung on, looking up to see Nobby climbing down after him.

"Careful, Nobby," he warned. "Mind how you——"

Nobby grinned ruefully from above. Nothing could upset him—except sickness.

"Comin' down, old bean," he cried. "I—ouch, I'm going to be sick. My head's——"

Thud!

He met the roof a little ahead of Dick and clung on desperately. His face had struck the dirty roof, and as he stared across at his chum, Dick grinned.

"My stars, you look like a sweep!"

"I'll pot you for that," Nobby roared and looked

up. Stonway waved an arm and rose into the heavens, his 'plane curving about and making off.

"We'll have to climb down quick" Dick cried to his chum. "Now for finding Von Sperg and making him cough up those tracings!"

Nobby worked his way towards his chum.

"Right-o, old bean," he smiled. "Lead the way to the jolly old ring!"

Dick turned and crept along to the end of the carriage. The train was slowing considerably at an incline. The boys crept down, reached the footboard of a sleeping saloon—for the trip to Petrograd was one which took a long time—and swung open the rear door.

They flung themselves into the corridor with a sigh of relief and Dick handed Nobby his handkerchief."

"Here you are. Wipe that smut from your face."

Nobby gasped.

"I—I've lost my bally eye-glass, bai jove!"

He looked desperately around. But Dick was leading the way forward. They hurried through the corridor, passing no one, and reached the day-compartment of the first-class carriages.

"Now," Dick whispered, turning, "steady how you go. We'll have to surprise him and be quick."

They crept ahead, peering into every compartment as they passed. The fourth was closed, the blinds drawn. Dick pulled up sharply.

He peered through a slight space between one of the blinds and the side of the window and then turned to his pal excitedly.

"Von Sperg's in there with Carlsbad, the rotter! And they're examining something. It's the tracings, I'll bet a dollar! Come on—we'll match those two rotters! Now then, Nobby, hold your breath."

He gripped the latch of the door and swung it wide, making a bolt into the compartment.

With a cry Von Sperg sprang to his feet, crushing

the tracings into his pocket as he caught sight of Dick.

"*Ach,*" he gasped, "*donner und blitzen!*"

He glanced desperately around while the bearded man at his side faced Dick menacingly.

"Vat do you want?" he roared.

"Those tracings," Dick cried, stepping into the compartment. "Dish 'em out, Sperg, you rotter, or——"

Sperg took a desperate glance round and then he gasped as he peered through the window. They were passing over a bridge under which a wide river flowed.

"Quick," he cried to his accomplice. "Quick—dis vay!"

Dick realised his intention in a flash.

"No, you don't," he roared, springing forward. But Carlsbad was in his way, trying to get out his revolver.

"Stand back," the Russian cried. "I'll——"

Dick threw himself upon him while Nobby burst in and added his weight. They had the little Russian down in a trice, and Dick reached out to grasp Von Sperg—but too late!

With a harsh, triumphant laugh the German had flung open the door, had stepped on to the footboard and glanced down at the wide river.

"Goot-bye, young shentelmen," he laughed.

Dick made a furtive grasp at his coat, but Von Sperg flung himself outwards a second too soon—and disappeared.

III

THE FIGHT BY THE RIVER

THUD!

Dick, Nobby and the Russian toppled heavily to the floor of the carriage and for a dizzy second Dick's head hung out of the doorway.

"Ged off my chest," the Russian snarled, grasping Nobby's throat with his sinewy hands, "or I'll——"

"Hold him, Nobby," Dick gasped, exerting every muscle to save himself being pushed out of the carriage bodily.

Nobby sent his left fist to the Russian's face, and sprang to his feet as Dick clambered on to the seat.

"Munch that beauty, Carlsbad," Nobby cried as the Russian tried to get up. "And if you get on your feet——"

He started.

"After him," Dick roared, leaning out of the open doorway. "In a second we'll be over this river and—Nobby, come on! Leave that fathead!"

Swish!

Out he went, flinging himself clear of the train and Nobby gasped as he watched him go.

The aristocratic youngster cast one glance at Carlsbad, who seemed to be contemplating rising and fighting him, shot out his fist that sent the Russian sprawling again on the floor, and darted on to the seat and to the side of the carriage.

He leaned out.

"Gee whizz," he gasped, "we'll be over in a second."

He caught a fleeting vision of Sperg swimming further down the river, saw Dick striking out nearer the bridge, set his lips and——

Out he went, soaring through the air, with Carlsbad bellowing from the carriage.

Splash!

Nobby struck the water, went under and fought his way to the surface.

He came up, rubbed the water from his eyes and looked around to see Dick within a couple of yards, the youngster having been swimming that way.

"There he goes, over there," Dick cried, pointing with his arm as he paused momentarily. "Come on, Nobby, after him!"

They struck out after the hard-swimming little German, who was tougher than he looked.

"My hat, he can swim," Dick cried.

Splash!

As the rear part of the train passed over the last few yards of the bridge Carlsbad sprang after his accomplice and the youngsters. Dick looked round and gasped.

"Carlsbad—he's after us. Gee, we'll give him a race for his money. I don't care a rap for him; it's Sperg I want."

Nobby was keeping his pace beside his chum and they were steadily gaining on the German ahead of them.

"How're you doing, Nobby?" Dick grinned. "Can you keep this up?"

Nobby grunted.

"I've lost my bally monocle again. It got stuck in my coat before, but now it's clean gone. Hang it all!"

Dick grinned and they swam in silence. Nearer and nearer they got to the little German, whose head they could see some yards in front.

"He's nearing the bank," Dick gasped. "Faster,

Nobby, faster! He's—he's up! He's out of the water! Faster, old chap—swim like the dickens!"

Nobby forged ahead, but Dick gained after a second and they dashed out of the water on to dry land when Sperg was running for dear life some distance ahead.

"After him, son," Dick yelled, glancing back to find Carlsbad still splashing clumsily in the water. "We'll have him and the tracings in a jiffy, now—gosh!"

Sperg was running parallel with the railway lines and far ahead they could see the train speeding away.

But nearer, a short distance ahead, Dick caught sight of the two rear carriages of the train, and they had stopped.

"Great Scott," Nobby gasped, "they've unhooked those carriages. Why on earth—my hat! Look, Dick—look!"

For dashing from the railway line came half-a-dozen men, running hard towards Sperg.

"His hirelings," Dick cried. "He had enough of 'em there for safety. The rotten little coward!"

The youngsters hesitated, slackening their pace. They didn't want to get caught yet, and be put where they couldn't get at Sperg.

But even as their pace slackened, the German ahead waved to his men, and turned, making back for the lads.

"Better scoot," Nobby warned, coming to a sudden halt beside his pal. But Dick's blood was up. The sight of those men ahead made him see red.

"I'm hanged if we do," he yelled. "Come on, Nobby, I was born of fighting stock. At 'em, lad—at the rotters!"

Nobby hesitated for a second, but Dick went headlong against the seven men, fists clenched and a determined look on his face.

"Nothin' for it," Nobby muttered. "I'll have to help the ass."

He darted off after Dick, realising that after all they

hadn't a chance of escape now, and a fight might help a little.

The seven men ahead came running towards them, and the plucky youngsters darted right into the midst.

Thud!

Dick made right for Sperg, a crazy idea in his head that he might be able to seize the tracings in the melee and with Nobby make a bolt for it.

The little German staggered back under the fierce left to his jaw and snarled angrily.

"Kill him," he roared to his men. "Ach, you young spit-fire, I'll——"

Even as Dick made to dart in again three of the other men flung themselves upon him and bore him to the ground.

He lay there, struggling vainly and uttering sharp epithets about Jerries and Russians in general.

"I'll show you fists when I get up," he cried, as one huge fellow knelt heavily on his chest. "I'll push your face in, you——"

Nobby did less barging and, at the critical moment, was standing in the centre of the other three men lashing out for all he was worth.

Thud!

A beautiful left decorated the features of the biggest of the three, a fat German in tweeds. The fellow staggered back.

"Ach," he snarled, "you pig of a dog!"

He knew little English. Nobby laughed as he lashed at a second.

"Take that, you dog of a pig," he grinned. "And there's another coming hot on its heels if—gerroff! I'll——"

The third German, aided by one of the trio who had downed Dick, flung themselves on the aristocratic youngster. He staggered back as they grasped his shoulders.

"Ha!" one of them roared, "we haf you, you——"

Thud!

Nobby did a swing-round cut to the face of one of them and he started back.

But Sperg came up, and roused them on to the odds of four to one, and in a moment Nobby was on the ground, helpless, beside Dick.

"You're an ass, Dick," he grunted. "If you'd have run——"

"Not from a flock of Germans," Dick roared, and glancing up at the grinning Sperg he scowled.

"If I got you on your own, you little fox, I'd——"

Sperg laughed harshly. His smile was unpleasant now.

"Mine friendts," he purred, "you air beaten, hein? You fight well, you English. But nod against Germans."

Dick and Nobby were dragged to their feet, and Dick struggled vainly once more to get loose.

"You had some chance of losing, didn't you?" he cried, facing Sperg disgustedly. "And what are you going to do with us now, Sperg? Chuck us in the river, I suppose."

Sperg shook his head slowly.

"No, young shentelman. Sperg is more cautious. Ach, here is my goot friendt, Carlsbad."

The Russian came panting up angrily, and faced Nobby.

"You pull my beard in that carriage," he bawled. "I hit you for that—so!"

With his open palm he struck Nobby a cowardly blow across the face. Dick roared and struggled again, but the smile did not leave Nobby's face.

"Splendid," he approved. "And I thought you had a squint!"

Carlsbad cursed angrily, but Sperg drew him back.

"Gently, mine friendt. You shall have your chance—later. One moment."

He turned to one of his hirelings—a fellow with a massive moustache and a big, sullen face.

"Fritz, that was clever of you. You saw what was happening. It was a goot job we were all making for Russia together. You unhooked the carriage so that you could all follow in time. It was goot—verry goot."

Fritz drew himself up proudly.

"What do we do now, chief? A friendt of mine, one Hans Sevinz, an airman, has his place very near. If you are in haste to get to our destination—— ?"

"Vonderful," Sperg approved. "Go you, Fritz, and be quick. This 'plane—it will hold—how many ?"

Fritz spread his big hands.

"Ach, it is a big 'plane—but I know not how many it vill take."

"And Hans, he is to be trusted ? "

"Mit anything, chief."

Fritz turned and made off towards a long line of trees, and in the distance Dick caught sight of a big house on a slight rise in the ground.

Sperg wheeled round and faced the youngsters. The smile disappeared from his face. His eyes narrowed to gleaming little slits.

"You Britishers air fools," he sneered. "You poke your noses into the affairs of odhers and——"

"Hark at him," Nobby grinned. "Well, if you poked your nose into a haystack, Sperg, old bean, you'd make it look twice its size."

"Ach," the German snarled, "you are pleased to make fun. Vait. Presently we start for Russia. Maybe to-morrow we reach it, airly in the morning. An' then—then you see."

Dick's eyes gleamed.

"You'll see us bolting with those tracings, you green-eyed son of a sausage stew."

Sperg conversed animatedly with Carlsbad and then gave some brief instructions to three of the hirelings, who immediately made off towards the railway.

A little while later, while Sperg and his accomplice were still talking together, the youngsters—held captive by two burly men with revolvers in their hands—heard a roar and saw a great aeroplane rise into the air in the distance, turn and make towards them and descend to a spot about a hundred yards away.

Sperg went to the 'plane alone and then beckoned after a moment, and the guards hustled the youngsters towards the 'plane.

"We begin," he sneered to the lads, "and never again you see this country or your own. Ach, you learn how Sperg repays those who interfere with his business."

"I'll interfere with your ugly face, when I get a chance," Dick cried. "You wait, me and my pal aren't done yet, not by a long chalk, old son!"

Desperately he was thinking of his uncle. Somehow or other those tracings must be got to Vienna, where his uncle was to take them, within a couple of days.

His life didn't matter—his country and his uncle's honour did. And given the smallest chance——

Sperg sneered.

"Your insults do not hurt me," he snapped. "Come on, bring those prisoners into the 'plane."

He had addressed his guards, but Nobby uttered a roar as they were hustled towards the big machine.

"Here, chop my head off, chuck me in the river, but for the love of humanity, Sperg, you rotter, don't take me up into the air again. It makes me beastly sick in my stomach, and——"

One of the guards gave him a blow with his fist to silence him, and Nobby grew distinctly chill.

"Thanks, so much," he sniffed. "Come on, Dick, we've got to go up and be sick."

Dick glanced admiringly at his pal, whom no perils could ruffle nor rob of his quaint, affected humour.

They were bound with ropes and bundled into the big machine, and presently, with Sperg, Carlsbad and the two guards behind them in the big space provided for passengers, the machine rose into the air.

Dick's thoughts were miserable. Every minute took them further and further away from Germany and chances of success. Every minute increased their perils.

"Hanged if I know what we can do," he muttered, turning in his cramped position to glance at his pal.

Nobby winked and made a wry face.

"I jolly-well know what I'll do," he moaned.

"What's that, son?" Dick asked, whispering lest the others should hear.

"Be sick, mighty quick," Nobby groaned. "Ouch, for the the love of goodness, Sperg, lend me a handkerchief!"

But his request was unheeded, and by that evening, after lying bound and unattended to for hours, the lads' spirits began to fail them.

Night came on and still, through the dark sky, they roared on their way. Ahead of them sat Sperg and his men, talking animatedly, and once Sperg brought out the tracings and grinned at his chief accomplice.

But sleep came to the lads, through utter weariness.

After what seemed an endless series of dozing and waking, faint light crept through the little windows of their aerial prison.

Dick did not wake Nobby, who was still sleeping peacefully. But an hour later, when the aristocratic youngster opened his eyes and yawned, Dick felt distinctly the motion of descending.

"We're going down, Nobby," he whispered. "Things are going to happen now, one way or another."

Nobby grunted ruefully.

"They are, old bean—to us."

But Dick shook his head determinedly.

"Don't you believe it, Nobby. Cheer up. If things go right we'll be in Vienna before two days—with those tracings."

Sperg, who had been dozing in front, awakened and heard the lad's words. He snarled angrily.

"Shut up, you," he cried. "Your fate vill not long be a mystery to you."

They felt the jerk as the 'plane touched ground. It came to a halt. The engine stopped.

Sperg and Carlsbad got out, leaving the guards to watch over the youngsters. Then came the German's voice.

"Out with them quick!"

The youngsters were hustled through the narrow doorway to be thrown unceremoniously on to a barren stretch of hard ground. Sturdy pines seemed to hem them in on all sides and a few yards away stood a solitary hut of wood.

Sperg grinned evilly as he pointed to the hut and glanced down at the angry and ruffled youngsters.

"Dot is vhere you go, mine friendts," he snarled. "Dot is vhere you go, quickly—and you do not come out again, hein? Ach, Von Sperg knows how to play safe."

The smile disappeared as he turned to the guards.

"Take them in," he snapped, "and tie them up. I'll deal with our prisoners myself."

IV

THE EXTRA TOOL

ROUGHLY the lads were forced towards the hut, and when the door was reached their guards bundled them through and thrust them into the farthest of three rooms.

This latter apartment was bare of all furniture, while the other two were almost luxuriously furnished considering the wild position in which the hut stood.

In the walls of the room were fixed two stout iron rungs and to each of these one of the boys was bound.

The guards knew how to tie their knots, and glancing across at Dick, Nobby thought that more than once while his guard was tying his wrists to the rung Dick winced with pain.

Eventually the guards left them, slamming the door behind them, and Nobby stared ruefully at his pal.

"A nice pickle we've landed ourselves in, my boy," he grinned. "Now perhaps our keen, alert think-boxes will help us out of *this* kettle of fish. I—what's up, Dicky?"

Nobby was anxious. Dick seemed to be wincing with pain. But the youngster made no reply for a second.

"Is it those ropes, Dick? If the rotters——"

"Ouch! Done it, Nobby, my lad!"

With a grunt Dick freed his two hands and Nobby gasped in admiration and astonishment.

"Great Scott, where did you learn your tricks, old son?"

"Tricks nothing," Dick grinned. "Fact is—look, I had to lie on this all the time we were in the 'plane."

He came over to his pal and held out the broken blade of a small spanner-knife combination and Nobby's eyes gleamed.

"Gosh, now I understand how it was you winced when they tied you up. My hat, Dicky, your—your hands are bleeding."

Dick grinned.

"So would yours be if they mauled you about and you were secreting a broken knife in your hands. I was scared every second lest they should see it. Still, we'll soon have you free."

He whipped loose his pal's bonds and with a sigh Nobby stood away from the wall.

"Champion, Dicky," he approved. "I didn't know you had it in you to—hist, what's that?"

Dick frowned and both lads listened intently.

"Someone's in the next room," he whispered. "Sperg and Carlsbad have come in. We can't get clear just now. Have to wait our time. Gee, quick—back to your rung."

Both lads darted to their places, folding their hands behind them over the rungs as though they were still tied and helpless. Suddenly the door opened and Sperg came in.

He grinned triumphantly at the youngsters.

"Goot day, mine friendts. So that is vat you haf done mit yourselves, hein?"

Dick scowled angrily.

"It's nothing to what we're going to do with you."

Sperg closed the door behind him and came towards them unsuspectingly.

"Ach, ven you air free—but then you vill haf no chance. Look. I haf brought these for you to see once more."

He took out the tracings as he spoke and flourished them in Dick's face.

"You see, mine friendt? Your uncle, his honour vill be ruined, and your silly, simple country vill lose much prestige and naval advancement through the loss of these plans. You think you air clever, you English. Ach, you saw how easily Von Sperg hoodwinked your uncle, eh?"

Dick's eyes narrowed.

"You rotten spy! He trusted you the deuce of a lot more than I'd have done."

Sperg grinned again.

"Ach, maybe. But you vill never get these tracings and you vill never see your uncle again."

"Look here, Sperg," Nobby cried, "why the dickens don't you kill us right away? Why keep on threatening——"

Sperg spun round, anger in his eyes.

"You think I do nod mean vhat I say. You think—ach, you young demon!"

Nobby had played his hand beautifully. A second after Von Sperg had turned, Dick sprang.

He took one bolt into the air and came down on Sperg's shoulders, bearing him to the ground. But not before the German had thrust the tracings into his pocket and was holding them there.

"Help!" he cried in his native tongue. Nobby dashed to his pal's assistance, but that cry had gone out and in a moment——

"Quick," Dick hissed, "hold his arms back while I get those tracings. I——"

Nobby tugged at the German's arms while Dick kept his hand over his mouth and tried to push his hand into the spy's pocket.

But too late!

From outside, in the direction of the next room, voices and footsteps could be heard.

Suddenly, even as Dick almost had his hand in the pocket of the German's coat, the door swung open and, revolver in hand, Carlsbad and another guard dashed in.

"Hands up!" the Russian snarled.

Dick and Nobby sprang back, angered and dismayed. But Dick knew what to do. For the moment they would have to lose the tracings, but they must not let themselves be bound again or their last chance would be gone.

"Quick, Nobby," he roared, his eyes gleaming. He ducked and made a dive for Carlsbad, knocking up the Russian's revolver arm while the other guard flung himself at Nobby.

Dick sent Carlsbad spinning, and Nobby, evading the guard by a clever piece of footwork, darted through the doorway after Dick.

Through the two other rooms they darted, with the guard and Carlsbad on their heels and Sperg bawling from behind.

But they reached the door of the cottage and out into the clearing in which it stood.

In the doorway Carlsbad and the guard, both trying to take it together, got momentarily stuck and cursed each other. Then the guard got free and made after the lads.

He reached them, as they reached the edge of the dense stretches of tall trees, and Dick gasped a couple of words to his pal.

Nobby and Dick made for the fellow, and the guard turned to ward off a blow which Nobby aimed at him.

But Nobby never landed the blow. He ducked, charged with his head, and Dick was bending behind the fellow.

Thud! Biff! And an ugly Russian cuss-word.

The guard went sprawling, and the lads, roaring with laughter, bolted into cover of the trees before the yelling Carlsbad came up.

For minutes they darted through the trees as fast as their legs could carry them. For some time they heard the voices of their pursuers, and then they seemed

to get clear, for the sound of cracking twigs and footsteps behind was heard no more.

They came up short and breathless.

"Crikey!" Dick grinned. "I thought we'd be copped for sure that time."

Nobby grunted.

"We missed those confounded tracings again."

Dick shook his head.

"Yes, but we're free. That's the main thing. We'll have to get away from here. The other guard and the airman, round the other side of the cottage, and Sperg and the rest will be after us in a body presently.

"Let's press on," he cried, turning and making off towards the left. "This way'll do as well as any other."

It was almost like night in the dense forest. They were in Russia now, with a vengeance. The air was chill and their thin coats were poor protection. Overhead the trees were whining to the cold breezes.

"What's Sperg's idea, Dick, d'you think?" Nobby asked as they pressed on, to put as much distance between themselves and the cottage as possible for the present.

Dick grunted.

"The rotter's evidently brought us here with the idea of shutting our mouths, for he'll want to get back to Berlin to carry on his nefarious methods again. But first he'll go to Petrograd to sell those tracings. I reckon he's been commissioned by Carlsbad's employers there to get 'em."

"The rotten little brute."

"True words," Dick put in earnestly. "And—gee, look out, there's another cottage affair ahead. Look."

Through the trees they caught sight of a rude log building smaller than the one from which they had fled. Nobby looked relieved.

"Thank goodness. Perhaps it's a woodman and we'll get some grub."

"Better be cautious." Dick warned. "We'll see. anyway. This wood is evidently one of Sperg and Co.'s secret lairs when flight is necessary, and—look, the door's opening."

The door of the hut opened, and a big, stout man in thick shirt and breeches appeared. His bearded face looked gruesome, but, as he watched from the shelter of a tall tree, Dick made up his mind quickly.

The youngster had some knowledge of Russian, but a good idea occurred to him now. Boldly he took Nobby's arm and strode forward, hailing the surprised woodman.

"Hey," he called in English, "can you give us some grub, mister?"

The woodman started, caught sight of them, and darted his hand inside the door for his gun.

Dick laughed as he brought it out and covered them.

"All serene, old bean," Nobby cried. "We're not trying any tricks. Understand English?"

They came nearer, holding up their hands to disarm the bearded woodman's suspicions.

He seemed not to understand them.

"Speak to him in Russian; you know a bit," Nobby muttered, but Dick shook his head.

"You speak German, eh?" he asked in that language. It was a good job that, knocking about in holiday time with his uncle, he knew more than his own language.

The Russian nodded quickly, and answered him in German.

"Yes. Who are you?"

Dick came nearer, fearlessly.

"Put down that gun, old fellow. We only want food."

The woodman put down his gun, evidently satisfied.

He led the way into the hut, and there surveyed the lads.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Dick grinned.

"Don't get many callers here, eh? I reckon not. We are English, and we're anxious not to fall in with a lot of Germans hereabouts."

The Russian started and stared keenly.

"Ach!" he grunted, "you mean the men who sometimes come to the hut a mile to the west?"

"Yes," Dick replied, "that's it. Can you give us a change of thick clothes—they may be useful for disguise—and some food? We'll pay you in German or English notes."

The woodman's eyes gleamed.

"English? Yes. I will help. Wait."

He went into the adjoining room and returned with peasant clothes and a dish of bread.

"Good," Dick approved, taking out his wallet and planking down an English treasury note he had. "This will do. That money enough?"

The Russian took it greedily.

"It will. You eat, clothe yourselves—but you go. You must not be here when they—they come. They will search?"

"Yes, pretty sure."

"Ach, then I fear them. They are bad men. Be quick."

Dick turned to Nobby.

"Come on, son, into those clothes."

They changed quickly and then tackled the food. Barely had they finished than the woodman, who had stood by watching, put his finger to his lips and crept to the door.

He turned back with fear in his eyes.

"Ach, they come. Listen!"

The lads stood stock still. The could hear sounds from outside. Dick grasped his pal's arm.

"Quick," the woodman hissed, "into the next room. I will tell them I see you pass and go—to the north."

Dick nodded gratefully.

"You're a sport. You shan't lose over this. Nobby, quick, come on."

They darted into the next room, closing the door after them, and waited. They heard voices, a knocking at the door, and the voice of the woodman in reply.

"They're talking Russian," Nobby whispered.

Dick nodded.

"Of course, you ass! What d'you expect—gee, the rotten traitor!"

Nobby crouched lower and looked up at his pal.

"What's up? What are the johnnies saying, Dick?"

Dick's features became grim. His eyes narrowed and he glanced round quickly.

There was only one window—a small affair in the opposite wall. He pointed to it, wheeling and grasping Nobby's arm.

"A dickens of a good job I didn't let that fellow know I spoke Russian. He's talking to 'em in that language, told them we're here, and they're going to pay him to—quick, this window! The beastly woodman's given us away!"

They darted across the room, sprang on a stool near the window, and Nobby squeezed himself out. Dick was after him, like a shot, and they made off through the trees.

But they had barely gone twenty yards when they heard Sperg's angry voice behind, and footsteps crunching dry twigs underfoot.

"After them," Sperg was yelling. "Bring them in, alive or dead! After them quickly, you pack of lazy fools!"

The lads dashed on, speed their only object. But ever those heavy footsteps were behind.

"We don't seem to be gaining," Dick gasped. He saw what awaited them if they were caught. Death—dishonour to his uncle and serious consequences to their country.

"We've got to get away," he cried. "We can't let 'em get us now!"

Then came a cry from Nobby. He tumbled headlong over a fallen branch of a tree and crumpled up in a heap.

Dick darted to his side, pulling his pal up as he reached him.

"Carefully, old bean! Steady and quick are the words! What—what's the matter?"

Nobby shook himself free and staggered against a tree.

"You go on, you ass!" he spluttered, wincing with pain. "I've sprained my ankle or something. I—go on; they'll get me, but they mustn't get those plans, and—get on," he cried frantically as Dick shook his head. "Why can't you ——?"

"No," Dick said. "I'm sticking with you, old chap. Quick, there's a high tree here! I'll climb it. See if you can do the same. I'll stick behind and you can use my shoulders."

It took them three painful minutes to reach the lower branches, and then Nobby pluckily pulled himself upwards, ignoring the pain in his ankle, until both lads were crouching in the upper branches.

They listened.

"They're coming," Dick whispered, "and they're coming this way. Hold on, Nobby, old chap. Hold on if you can! How's your ankle?"

With the footsteps of their pursuers coming nearer every second, and the knowledge that they would be shot if Sperg's men so much as got a sight of them now, Nobby grinned bravely.

"It's not my ankle, Dick," he groaned. "It's not havin' my beastly eyeglass that ——"

His voice trailed off. His eyes closed. Dick gasped in dismay, and leaned forward in time to prevent his pal toppling headlong to the ground.

The pain had been too much, in that climb up the tree, for Nobby. He had used his sprained ankle despite the agony, to climb the quicker.

Now it was more than he could stand. He had fainted.

V

HOT AND COLD

GRIMLY, with fine determination and expending every ounce of strength he possessed, Dick held on to his pal.

Nobby was a dead weight in his arms as he held him there, not daring to move lest he should betray their presence.

Then, through the semi-darkness of the forest beneath, came dim figures, and, at their head now, was Sperg.

"We shall find them," he was saying confidently to Carlsbad, while he glanced down at the loaded revolver in his hand. "Once let me see them—only that—and I shall shoot, and my aim will be straight."

He sneered triumphantly, and Carlsbad laughed harshly and made some reply which Dick could not catch.

But they did not look up, and went on talking. Dick waited until they had gone, and he could stand the strain on his arm no longer, and then he shifted Nobby so that his pal lay in a safe position near the trunk.

"Nobby, old boy," he cried urgently, "wake up—open your eyes. They've gone, and—gee, you're waking up!"

Nobby opened his eyes slowly, and grinned up weakly at his pal.

"I—I'm an ass," he muttered. "I—I fainted didn't I?"

Dick nodded.

"You did, but you're all right now, old son. They've gone."

Nobby struggled to a sitting position.

"So has my beastly eyeglass," he moaned.

"Drat your eyeglass," Dick grunted. "Look here, old chap, can't you manage to get down, or shall I lend you a hand?"

Nobby glanced scornfully at his pal.

"I'll manage, old bean," he grinned. "I don't think my beastly ankle's so bad now. Come on, follow your uncle!"

Going down was easier, and, when they stood on firm ground again, they listened intently.

But the voices and footsteps had passed beyond earshot.

"Look here, we'll clear out of the way for a bit," Nobby suggested. "I'll work my ankle a bit, for goodness knows I'll want to use it. They're sure to come back this way."

Dick nodded.

"I've got a plan," he muttered. "We'll clear now and rest. Let's make towards the right."

Nobby could only walk with Dick's aid, and together they made off eastward, going as far as possible, so as to make sure of avoiding Sperg and his men when they returned.

An hour later, after several rests, they sat down on a fallen log and Dick grinned contentedly.

"Now for a rest. Gee, Nobby, you're doing well with your ankle. I—listen, what's that?"

They both listened. It was a train.

"My stars," Dick gasped, "we're near the railroad, and it must be the main line to Petrograd. Stay here while I hop away and look."

He went off, and, when the sound of the train had died away in the distance, Dick returned.

"Railroad it is," he grinned. "Now, see here,

Nobby, we'll rest until nightfall, and then break in upon old Sperg."

Nobby frowned.

"How d'you mean? What chance do we —— ?"

"He may not leave until to-morrow, for he'll want to make sure of us first. Leave it to your uncle—here, just take a sniff at this."

And in low tones he expounded his daring plan. Nobby gasped as he listened.

"Gee whizz," he grinned, "you've got some bright ideas, old bean. I'll follow in a treat. By to-night my ankle ought to serve us O.K., if we exercise it a bit between now and then."

And so the hours until dark were passed. When night came the lads were hungry, but eager for their adventure. They lay low, not daring to go far in case they should happen across Sperg and his men.

But with the darkness they stole back, marking their route by their own footprints and marks they had made to the cottage where they had been held prisoner. They avoided the woodman's hut. The less trouble they caused just now the better.

Presently, through the dark, they saw the lights of Sperg's hut, and Dick pulled the limping Nobby up sharply.

"Look, here we are, old son. Now for the giddy start. Look here, Nobby, let me go in alone. Your ankle——"

"Rats!" Nobby whispered. "Lead on. You're too young to be trusted on your own."

Together they crept to the door of the hut and crouched there, listening.

Their task was a perilous one. Any moment they might be seen. Perhaps Sperg still had men out searching in the forest.

"Brr, it's cold!" Nobby grunted, drawing up the collar of his rough peasant's shirt.

But Dick said nothing. He was peering through the keyhole into the first room of the hut.

Sperg was there, in his shirt and trousers, evidently preparing for sleep. His couch was in the next room, and even as Dick watched, Sperg went through into the adjoining apartment.

The youngster turned and drew Nobby nearer.

"Come on. He's gone into his bedroom. I'll bet my shirt he's hidden those tracings somewhere in the outer room. Why? Because he knows that if we did come in search of them we'd first think of looking on him, and he'll sleep with a loaded revolver under his pillow. For goodness sake, not a sound. If we're caught it means death!"

Nobby nodded determinedly.

"For your uncle and our country, old son. Lead the way into the bull-ring."

Dick pushed the door open slightly. It was unlocked. That meant Sperg's men weren't very far away. But everything seemed to be deadly silent just now.

The lads crept into the outer room, now in darkness all but for the ray of light which crept through from Sperg's bedroom.

They could see him now, eating a frugal meal by a table near his couch.

Dick nodded to Nobby. Together they began a search of the room. But after ten minutes, though Sperg was finishing his meal, and they had searched every conceivable place, they had failed to find the tracings.

Dick glanced hopelessly at his pal.

"No luck," he whispered. "We'll have to chance the other thing. Ready?"

"Sure."

Dick went towards the door of the inner room and took a small object from the table on his way. He reached the doorway and took up his position there.

Nobby crept up to the other side of the doorway, and then Dick set his lips.

He raised his hand that held the small china object and dropped it.

Crack!

The sound was slight, but it was sufficient. They heard Sperg gasp, and he stood still in his tracks.

"Who's that?" he called in German. "Have you returned, Carlsbad?"

No answer. He moved to the doorway, revolver in hand. He reached the doorway.

"Now!"

The plucky youngsters sprang forward and threw themselves on the spy, bringing him to the ground with a thud.

He was taken utterly by surprise. The lads had shaken his revolver from his hand, and in a second they had him bound with rope they had found in the room.

"Now, then," Dick snapped, "up with him, Nobby, and dump him in that chair by the fireplace."

Embers were still smouldering there. They lifted the astonished, angry German into the chair, and Dick took the revolver and covered him.

"Now, Von Sperg," he cried sharply, "where are your men?"

The German sneered.

"Out looking for you. In a moment or two——"

Dick grunted scornfully.

"We'll be gone. We've come for those tracings. Cough 'em up! Where have you hidden them? In this room—you're too clever to have them about you. Now, spit it out! Where?"

Sperg sneered.

"Vind out for yourself," he snarled. "You think I am goin' to tell you?"

Dick pressed the muzzle of the weapon against his head.

"Now, be quick! Or——"

Sperg smiled calmly, one of his characteristic smiles.

"Ach, but you may kill me an' I do nod tell. No, an' a dead man is no good to help you."

Dick nodded grimly.

"All right, then, we'll play a little game." A grin spread over his features. "Nobby, ready, old bean?"

"Sure thing," Nobby grinned. He had brought the lamp from the next room and the apartment was well lighted now.

"It's a game called hot and cold," Dick snapped to Sperg. "You understand?"

Sperg sneered.

"Nein! But you vill not make me tell."

"We'll see," Dick muttered determinedly. "We are sure you've hidden those tracings somewhere in this room. We're going to make you *betray where*! Nobby will move about and you will watch him. When he nears the place where those tracings are—gee, you'll betray it somehow. Right-o, Nobby, start away."

Nobby grinned and moved to the little writing table of rough wood near the door.

"How's this for a start, Spergy, old beanstalk?" he smiled, fingering the rough table. "No? Cold, eh? Didn't so much as move an eyelash, Dick. Right?"

He moved to the cupboard by the window, now shuttered.

"How's this for the next, Sperg, old bean? Hot or cold? Tracings anywhere about this cupboard?"

Dick was staring into Von Sperg's face, but the spy merely smiled.

"No go," Dick grunted. "Try somewhere else."

"Right," Nobby beamed. "We'll try the single row of books on the ledge by the window. If only

I'd my beastly eyeglass I'd read the titles. Tracings anywhere in the books, Sperg ? "

"No," snapped Dick. "Sperg docsn't mind your looking there."

Nobby was getting desperate. He flashed one look at Dick. The room had little furniture. He tried half-a-dozen things without avail. The smile did not leave the wily German's face.

The table in the centre was their last hope. It was littered with odd papers, books, food, and a fern in a pot.

"Ah!" Nobby cried, "the table—in the centre. Papers—books, fern—loaf of bread—we'll try——"

"Stop!"

It was Dick's voice. He thrilled with triumph. Sperg had suddenly closed his eyes and was gripping the arms of the chair. He had tried to hide his fear and emotion, but too late.

"Somewhere on the table ——" Dick cried. "Try ——"

"Gee whizz and bumpers!"

Giving vent to an exclamation, Nobby had seized the loaf of bread and broke the top from the bottom with eager hands.

For a moment he stared into the broken pieces of bread, and then gasped.

"My hat!" he cried, digging his fingers into the bread, "what an ingenious place to hide a thing. Quick, old son—take 'em!"

He drew a little screwed-up bunch of paper from the bottom of the loaf and held it out to Dick.

"The tracings ——"

"Curse you!" Sperg snarled. "I vill make you pay vhen I——"

Dick nodded to his pal and his eyes gleamed.

"Shut up, Sperg. No, keep 'em yourself, Nobby. I'll see to Sperg first and then——"

Crash! Thud!

"Hands up!"

On the very verge of triumph the door of the room was flung open, and Carlsbad, at the head of the burly Germans, flung in. He covered the youngsters, and uttered a cry of anger as he saw Sperg bound in the chair.

"Up mit your hands, you English dogs!" he snarled. "We saw it—just came back, and through a crack in the shutters of the vindows we—put 'em up—or——"

Crash!

But Dick had been too quick. Like a flash he flung his own weapon at the lamp near Nobby. He was half-turned away from Carlsbad.

Thud!

The lights went out. The lamp splintered to pieces.

"The door," Dick gasped, bolting towards the inner door, thinking Nobby would understand, and the guards would guard the outer.

"Comin'," he heard Nobby call, amid the rushing of men across that room and the curses of Sperg.

Dick nearly reached the inner door when he felt a dark figure touch him. He darted back in an effort to make a detour.

But——

Click!

"Got you! Up with your hands!"

A powerful torch flashed on. Nobby came to a halt within a couple of yards of his pal. It had been Nobby with whom Dick had nearly collided.

Caught like rats in a trap, the plucky youngsters turned fearlessly to face the merciless rays of the powerful torch and the merciless, cruel stares of Von Sperg's bloodthirsty hirelings.

"Now," they heard Von Sperg sneer, triumphantly, "we vill see who is master, young shentelmen!"

Carlsbad whipped his accomplice free, and Sperg strode into the rays of light.

"Now," he snarled, facing Nobby, "gif me those tracings."

Nobby grinned calmly.

"Tracings?" he asked innocently. "What tracings, old bean? And where?"

Sperg understood, and a cunning smile spread over his face.

"All right," he sneered, "den we vill play a leetle game—but nod of hot and cold. For you, mine friendt, it will be 'ot—as 'ot as physical pain was ever known to be!"

VI

THE PLUCK OF THE ARISTOCRAT

A ROAR of rage left Dick's lips and he made a desperate but futile attempt to get at the wily, triumphant German.

"You blinkin' rotter!" he cried. "If you lay a hand on my pal I'll——"

Sperg turned his grinning face upon Dick.

"Ach, and vhat vill you do?"

Dick remained silent. He could do nothing in the hands of those guards. Once more Von Sperg was turning to Nobby, who faced him with a smile on his handsome face.

"Now, then," Sperg sneered, "vhere is dose tracings?"

Nobby shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll have to be more explicit, old foxy-face, as my pal calls you. What tracings?"

"Tell me," Sperg roared, "vhere you put them?"

Nobby shook his head.

"I couldn't, old beak. Principle, you know."

Sperg turned to the biggest of the Germans, and nodded.

"Fritz, you know how to make people talk?"

Fritz grinned evilly.

"I do," he said simply. "Give me the chance with that young dog of an Englishman."

"Go ahead," Sperg muttered. He stood back. Fritz strode over to Nobby, whom a burly fellow was holding, despite the revolver covering the boys. Once more Dick's voice cut across the terse silence.

"Von Sperg, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life if you touch him!"

Nobby glanced at his pal and shook his head.

"I'm not funky, Dick, old bean," he smiled. "Not of that big lump of mutton, as you'd say, at all events."

Fritz came to his side. Nobby could not move, though his guard stood away, for the revolver still covered them both.

Fritz grasped the youngster's shoulders and pushed his huge knee into Nobby's back, pulling the shoulders down and backwards for all he was worth.

"Now," Von Sperg sneered, "speak!"

Nobby, his face distorted with a look of agony, shook his head.

"No," he gasped, "never!"

Sperg motioned Fritz to let go.

"Ach, maybe I gif him credit for more cleverness than he has. Search him, quick!"

But a search proved fruitless.

"Once again, Fritz," the spy snapped.

Once more Nobby was gripped and his shoulders forced back.

"Speak!" Von Sperg cried.

"Never!" Nobby gasped, tortured by pain now. "I'll see you blue in the face before—gosh, I——"

His face went white.

"Speak!" Sperg repeated. He nodded to another German, who took Nobby's arm and twisted it, adding to the torture.

"Go on, kill me!" Nobby cried. "But I'll never —speak! Gosh! This blinkin'——"

Maddened by the sight of his pal being tortured, Dick turned blazing eyes upon Von Sperg.

"Let him go!" he cried. "Hang you, I—Nobby, tell them. Speak, old man, and——"

Sperg laughed harshly.

"Somevheres, in the dark, he hid those tracings.

I vill haf them. Tell him to speak if he would save himself."

"Speak, Nobby!" Dick urged, and then, as Nobby caught his gaze, a look flashed between them.

"All right," he gasped. "I—it's in Fritz's pocket. I put it there after I'd smashed the light. I——"

Fritz let the youngster go and began to fumble in his pockets. Sperg and Carlsbad uttered excited, exultant cries and hurried forward, and Carlsbad as he passed within a yard of Dick was so excited that for a second his revolver hung loose in his hand.

Nobby seemed to be fainting. In that second Dick acted like lightning.

Thud!

His fist went out and sent Carlsbad staggering back.

"Got you—hands up, you rotters!"

He seized the revolver from the yelling Russian and covered the crowd of spies with it.

"Keep 'em up!" he roared. "Back to the door of that inner room and no tricks, or——"

Crack!

Sperg, cursing volubly, had made an effort to whip out his own revolver.

Dick's weapon spoke, and with a yell of rage and pain, Sperg threw up his hands.

"Curse you," he cried, "you've killed me! I——"

Thud!

He hit the floor and lay still. Dick turned blazing eyes on the rest.

"Now you understand I mean what I say. Back to the door, or——"

Nobby's fainting had been pretence. Now he had dashed to his pal's side, and they edged towards the door together.

"I've shot him," Dick muttered, as they retreated before the gaze of the angry Germans. "I don't care if—if I have. I had to give 'em an example,

and Sperg—oh, the rotter! He—are you O.K. Nobby, for a run?"

"Sure thing," Nobby grinned. "When and where you like."

They had reached the outer door. Dick opened it, stood aside and Nobby went out.

Not until then did the youngster speak to the pack again.

"You with that torch," he snapped. "I've kept you covered well. A good job it's a big one, and you'd have to use your other hand to switch it off. Hold it up—right up—above your head."

The German obeyed, holding the torch-lamp up. Dick nodded.

Crack!

His weapon spat out. The lamp smashed to atoms.

Slam!

The door shot to, and Dick wheeled to Nobby.

"For the railway line, son. Fast as you can. Quick—they'll be after us like the wind, and if we don't get a start it'll be all U.P. with us!"

They dashed into the forest from the clearing, and made off the way they knew led to the railway.

Within a couple of shakes they heard voices and footsteps from the hut and the yelling of angry Germans.

"They're armed, mostly," Dick gasped. "If once they see us—Nobby, can't you go faster, old son? Your ankle—gee, I forgot! I—I'm sorry, old man."

Nobby's features were pale with pain.

"I'll make it," he gasped, staggering along after his pal. "Don't wait for me, but——"

Dick grunted.

"Rats——here, give us your mit."

He grasped Nobby's wrist, and they made the desperate flight together. As they neared the railway line they heard the roar of an approaching train.

"Here's one!" Dick gasped. "It's going somewhere, maybe to Petrograd. Anyway, we've got to bunk."

Nobby nodded.

"Right you are!"

Crack!

They had emerged from the forest and reached the railway line, but a bullet spat against a stone near their feet.

"My stars, they're near and firing," Dick gasped. "If only we can get aboard this train——"

Crack!

A bullet whizzed by his head, but the train was almost upon them.

"Now, then," Dick cried. "We've got to get aboard. Can you—can you do it, Nobby?"

His pal was standing with set lips.

"I will," he muttered. "Hang my bally ankle!"

With a roar the train was upon them. Dick set his teeth as the giant engine rushed by within a yard of where they were standing. He saw Nobby spring forward and grasp the footboard, swinging himself up on it.

In a second Nobby flashed away in the darkness, clinging to the footboard. Dick sighed with relief.

"Now for me and——"

Crack!

He felt a stinging pain in his hand, but he took no notice. In a trice the train would be gone and——

He sprang, grasping the footboard of a rear carriage. The train flashed on, Dick clinging to the footboard, the while it seemed any minute he might lose his fragile hold and be flung back under the flying wheels.

But he clung on. They had escaped.

He drew himself up, grasped the carriage door, and worked his way frontwards until he saw, a few yards ahead, the figure of his pal.

"Gosh, that's a relief!" Dick cried. "Nobby," as his pal pulled himself to his feet, "how's things?"

Nobby turned his head and grinned.

"Better inside this beastly coach than out. Come on, after your uncle."

He opened one of the doors cautiously and crept in, Dick following a moment later. They pulled up, relieved and gasping, in the corridor.

"If only this train goes to Vienna," Dick cried, "we'll be well in luck. Those tracings, Nobby——?"

His pal grinned and held them out.

"Here they are. They were on me all the time, only when they searched me I did a bit of—er—simple palming!"

Dick gasped admiringly.

"You're a smart chap, Nobby. Bai Jove, you worked that a treat."

"So did you, old son, but—brrrr! Here comes the bag of trouble!"

A burly German official of the train was staggering along towards them.

"Here, you," he shouted in German, "vhat you think you do? This is nod a free train, and——"

Dick strode forward, pulling out his wallet.

"Where are you for?"

"Vienna, and——"

"How much?"

He turned the official's frown to smile by a liberal tip and prompt payment of fare.

"Had to catch this train," he explained. "Now for an empty compartment."

"Now," he grinned, as he sat opposite to Nobby in a comfortable first-class compartment, "I reckon our troubles are over now. Inside twelve hours we'll have this lot of tracings at Vienna, and—gee, won't Uncle Henry get a fit when he casts his giddy optics on our noble faces!"

He lay out flat on the seat and yawned.

"'Night, Nobby," he sighed. "Wake me up when we get to Vienna."

He was utterly fagged. He was hovering on the verge of sleep already. The last thing he remembered was hearing Nobby's distant, lazy voice in the old, aristocratic tone:

"'Night, old bean! Pleasant dreams, old stick!"

. . . . .

"Ouch! Geroff! Whatthedickensis—brrrrr!"

Dick sat up with a start to find Nobby standing over him, shaking his shoulders violently.

"Here, what's the ——?" We began, and Nobby grinned.

"Vienna, old chap! You've slept twelve solid hours and a bit. Ought to be ashamed of yourself. Come on, old top This is where we hurry."

Dick saw with a start that the train was standing in the station, people were bundling themselves out of the train, and porters were bawling "Wien" all over the shop.

"Crikey!" he gasped, "I must have been tired."

"You were," Nobby agreed. "But if you don't hurry now——"

Dick sprang to his feet, thrust his hand into his pocket to make sure of the tracings, and bolted out on to the platform after his pal.

"Come on, Nobby," he grinned. "Now to make uncle give us the glad mit, what-o! Gee, what a giddy crowd!"

The lads were nearing the barrier, and Nobby was fishing in his pockets for their paper tickets which the official had given them, when suddenly two stout Austrian police stepped from the crowd and confronted them.

"Ach!" one of them, evidently the superior officer, snapped. "You air the two young English boys, eh? You boarded the train by the Gulsberg Forest?"

Dick frowned in bewilderment, as the two pals were brought up short.

"Sure thing," he cried, "but we didn't expect a giddy police force to welcome us, and—here, what's the trouble?"

The officer pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

"You vill come mit me," he cried. "We haf had information from Von Sperg, the great German gentleman, an' he say he comes mit all speed. You haf property of his, hein?"

Dick started back with a gasp.

"Property of—Sperg's? What a blinkin'——"

But Nobby grasped his arm.

"Steady, old bean. We'll try the quick dodge again. You couldn't have hurt the brute much, after all, and he got to the telephone somewhere and sent a message through. His name is known all over Europe. Gee, what a cunning stunt to keep us off the Embassy until he comes! These police can easily be bribed, and—now, Dicky, now for the giddy flash!"

Dick nodded and turned to the officer.

"All right. Put 'em on!"

Were they to be baulked of victory so near the British Embassy? Would it be, after all, that Sperg's name and the easily-bribed police would rob him of the precious tracings at such a critical moment? Would his uncle's honour be ruined and Britain suffer, after all their trouble?

The officer advanced with the handcuffs. Dick ducked and charged the fellow, his head pitting the big man's stomach.

Biff!

Taken utterly by surprise, the officer staggered back with a yell of anger and amazement. He trod on the toes of the man behind and the two collapsed before the amazed crowd on the platform.

"Run for it, Nobby!" Dick cried, knocking heavily

against a porter inclined to interfere, and bolting for the barrier.

Nobby was on his heels. They reached the barrier. The ticket-collectors barred the way.

"Over the gate!" Dick roared, and took a mighty spring. Not for nothing had he won the high-jump that summer at his school.

Nobby scrambled over after him, sending one of the ticket-collectors sprawling with a gentle push from his foot.

The lads raced out of the station abreast of each other, and Dick, as he glanced round, saw the burly policeman barely twenty yards away.

"Come on, a cab!" he yelled. "We can bribe one of the drivers with our notes!"

They raced to the nearest cab, and while Nobby hopped in, Dick hung on to the footboard.

"British Embassy," he roared into the man's ear. "Drive like Old Harry, and—look!"

He waved his English treasury notes, which every foreigner knows. It was enough.

"Yah, quick!" the driver grinned.

Dick hopped in after his pal. The cab jerked forward, and, looking out of the window, Dick waved his hand to the angry policeman on the kerb.

"Cheerio, old socks!" he shouted. "See you in Cairo!"

The cab whirled through the iron gates and out into the wide street, but as Dick drew in his head he looked grim.

"It'll be a near thing, Nobby. They've collared a big private car and they're starting even now."

Out went his head again.

"Great guns," he gasped, "they're drawing nearer, Nobby. Unless we're quick—hey, go faster," he bawled in German to the driver.

The man shook his head.

"I vill be stopped in a minute—ach, the traffic!"

He swept across a junction of two roads against the officer in command's hand, and Dick grinned as he saw the pursuing car draw up.

"Now we'll win, Nobby. They're held up for the cross traffic, but—gee, they've explained to the officer. Gosh, he's let them through. They're gaining—gaining—driver, can't you make this old 'bus go faster?"

They were roaring along crazily, dodging traffic on every hand.

"The Embassy's only just down this street," Nobby gasped. "If we can make it, Dick—what?"

Dick shook his head quickly.

"By George, they're drawing abreast on the Embassy side of the street. We can't do it and—look!"

Gazing over his pal's shoulder, Nobby saw the big, pursuing car draw abreast of them, and the officers leaned out and shook their fists.

"Stop," they yelled to the driver, "in the name of the law!"

The driver could do no more.

"I haf to stop," he whined. He pulled up at the kerb. Right across the street was the imposing British Embassy. But how could they reach it with the police in between?

"Out, quick!" Dick gasped. "Follow me like the dickens!"

He darted out on to the pavement, Nobby on his heels.

The burly policeman, reinforced by another, ran after them, the leader shaking his fists.

"Stop, you!" he bawled. "I'll haf you—I'll——"

Dick gave a laugh and darted into the entrance to a big block of offices.

He reached the main stairway and ran up, Nobby close to him as ever.

"Up we go, Nobby," he grinned. "This way for the aerials."

"What's the idea?" Nobby panted as they reached the end of the first flight and sprang to the second. "We'll come to an end of this in a jiffy and then——"

From below came heavy footsteps and sharp German commands.

"Rats!" Dick yelled to their unseen pursuers. "Nobby, this way—I think this is the way."

He dashed through a door near the stairs at the end of the third flight. The lads had burst into a big office where a crowd of clerks were working. But Dick took not the slightest notice of their fright as they dashed in.

He raced to the window, flung it open and sprang on to the sill.

"This way, Nobby. I'm right. The telephone-wires go right across the street here. Come on!"

He grasped the double strand of wire above his head and flung himself free of the building. Nobby gasped as he saw him, but hesitated only for the fraction of a second.

The clerks were endeavouring to intercept, and outside Nobby heard the yells of the police.

"Cheerio, old beans," he grinned, and waved his hand as he jumped on to the sill and clutched the wires.

The crowds in the street below were treated to the sight of two fearless youngsters crossing the street to the British Embassy by working their way along with their hands, clinging to telephone wires.

"Stick it, Nobby," Dick yelled. "We're nearly home, old chap!"

The police were bawling from the office window. Dick reached the end of his journey and got his feet on to the sill of one of the Embassy windows.

Dick let go the wires. Nobby was a couple of yards behind. He waited and gave his pal a hand to get off.

"The window's open," he grinned. "Come on—gee, of all the wonders! Look whose face that is!"

Nobby gasped as he caught sight of the two astonished men in the room who had sprang to their feet.

"Bai jove, the British Ambassador and your——"

But Dick had raised the sash. He sprang into the big room, collapsed into a heap on the carpet and pulled himself up eagerly.

Nobby came through with more dignity and stood grinning behind his pal at the British Ambassador and—Sir Henry Stone, Dick's uncle.

Sir Henry gasped as he recognised them, and Dick noted the lines of worry on his pale features as he strode forward, his hand outstretched.

"My boy—where on earth—I've been worrying myself to death about you. Sperg—he—we found out——!"

He was too astonished and relieved to say much. Dick grinned as he took his uncle's hand.

"Watcher, uncle," he panted. "We've got the tracings. Didn't mind us coming through the window—what?"

His uncle gasped.

"You've—got—the—tracings?" He glanced back at the Ambassador and sighed.

"My lad, you've done Britain the greatest service that——"

Dick grinned.

"Me and—Nobby, you mean. But don't worry about that, uncle. Go and settle with the rotten police, will you? They—they made us climb across by those beastly wires and my hands—gee, it's worse than a rope for climbing!"

. . . . . .

It was an hour later and, sitting a couple of dishevelled figures before Sir Henry and the Ambassador

in that luxurious office, Dick and Nobby told their story.

Sir Henry nodded proudly when it was finished.

"Great Scott, you're a couple of wonders, boys. Well, I'll see that Sperg's career is cut short. He'll be coming post haste for Vienna, thinking the police will have prevented your getting to the Embassy.

"I'll get the Ambassador to demand that the police retain him," he grinned. "Our word is more powerful than Sperg's. We'll have him dealt with severely for theft of those tracings. It's easy to bribe some of the police officials here, but all Sperg's bribery won't keep us from getting him punished.

"I came in here to explain to the Ambassador. We'd made countless fruitless enquiries. Had given up hope of ever getting the tracings and the worry to me of fearing what might have happened to you, once we discovered a certain very unsavoury fact about Sperg——"

Dick grinned.

"Sperg will deserve his punishment, uncle. But Nobby and I got some real excitement out of it all. Gee, it was a bit of a whirlwind chase!"

Lord McGarth, the Ambassador, smiled and sat back in his chair.

"I'm sure we shall suitably reward these two youngsters, Sir Henry," he remarked quietly. "But meanwhile, don't you think they deserve our playing hosts at a jolly good feed and a box at the theatre, afterwards?"

"I do," Sir Henry avowed enthusiastically. "I'm tremendously proud of my nephew and his friend!"

"That'll be fine," Dick approved. "If Nobby—hey, what's the matter with you?"

Nobby had uttered a cry of amazement. He sprang to his feet and pushed his right hand into the neck of his shirt.

"Great beans!" he cried. "I've got it—got it at

last! It must have been stuck there all the time! I just felt it—something hard caught in my vest! Ha, what luck, bai jove—what gorgonzola luck!"

He took something from inside his shirt, grinned from side to side of his aristocratic face and—jammed his eyeglass in his eye.

"Bai jove, Dicky boy," he sighed, "I never feel half-dressed without this beastly window, what!"

THE END.

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